

**Interviewee: Simon Velasquez**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 19 May and 28 May 2003**

**Location: dining room of Velasquez home, West St. Paul, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, June 2003**

**Edited by: Thomas Saylor, July-August 2003**

Simon Velasquez was born on 24 January 1920 in Dolores, Texas, one of fourteen children of immigrant Mexican parents. His family moved to Lovell, Wyoming, when Simon was a child, and here he graduated from high school in 1940. He then lived some months in St. Paul, Minnesota before being drafted into the Army Air Corps in January 1942.

Simon completed Basic Training and gunnery school, and was made a ball turret gunner on B-XVII Flying Fortress bombers. He was posted overseas in late 1943, joining the 379<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, in England; he flew his first mission in November 1943. Over the next five months Simon completed twenty-six missions, flying with the 379<sup>th</sup>, 305<sup>th</sup>, and 384<sup>th</sup> Bomb Groups. On his twenty-seventh mission, on 13 April 1944, his B-XVII was shot down over Schweinfurt, Germany; Simon was one of two crew members who survived. Simon was sent to Stalag XVII-B, in Krems, Austria, where he remained until the war's final weeks. As the Russians approached, prisoners were evacuated by the Germans, and thus Simon was walking with other POWs when liberated by the Russians on 3 May 1945. He spent time in several medical facilities before being discharged in December 1945 with the rank of staff sergeant.

Again a civilian, Simon returned to St. Paul, Minnesota, got married (1947, wife Beatrice) and raised a family, and worked in the auto mechanic business. He worked thirty-eight years for Southview Chevrolet before retiring in 1985.

**Interview Key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**S = Simon Velasquez**

**[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation**

**(\*\*\*) = words or phrase unclear**

**NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity**

**Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.**

T: This is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today is 19 May 2003. This is our interview with Simon Velasquez of West St. Paul, Minnesota. First Mr. Velasquez, on the record, thanks very much for speaking with me today.

S: Thank you.

T: This interview is at the common room of your daughter's apartment house here in West St. Paul, Minnesota. We've been talking for some time and I know that you were born in Delores, Texas, 24 January 1920. We've talked to a lot of people, but I think you have the highest number of brothers and sisters. A total of fourteen children. Both of your parents were immigrants from Mexico.

S: Yes.

T: You attended schools and graduated from high school in Lovell, Wyoming.

S: That's true.

T: How old were you when the family moved to Lovell?

S: Ten.

T: You were ten so it was 1930. You finished high school 1940. Lovell High School. How many people were in your graduating class in high school? Lovell's not a big place, is it?

S: Forty-seven.

T: Forty-seven people? Now you had been in the Wyoming National Guard before you actually went to active duty. And you were living in St. Paul for a few months before you actually entered the service, being drafted in January of 1942. Even then, before we began taping, you said you wanted to be in the Air Corps as opposed to the Army or the Navy. Why did you want to join the Air Corps?

S: Because I actually didn't like all that marching and trench fighting.

T: So for you it was a way to get away from that aspect of the Army. What about the Navy?

S: I didn't want to swim (*laughs*).

T: (*laughing*) So that takes care of that. Now you did Basic Training in St. Petersburg, Florida. Right before you went in the service though the United States became involved in World War II, specifically after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. I'm wondering if you remember what you were doing when you first heard the news about December 7, 1941?

S: Specifically, I really can't remember very much about that. I know my younger brother was in the service already and he was on his way to the Pacific at that time. He was in the Marines. He volunteered for the Marines. When my brother volunteered to go into the Marines, we both went to Denver for the recruiting office. And they took him in the Marines because he was taller than I was. They rejected me because I wasn't tall enough at that time.

T: So you tried to get into the Marines. This was before Pearl Harbor?

S: I tried to get in the Air Force. At the time I tried to volunteer for the Air Force their height requirement was five foot six, something like that, and I wasn't tall enough so they rejected me. They said I could go in the Army. I said no. I'm going to go finish high school and then I'll think about it. That's why I didn't join at the time.

T: So you tried to join for the first time a year or two before that. How did you feel when you—because you were drafted into the Army then, right? How did you feel about leaving your civilian life behind and going into the service?

S: I didn't mind it at all because I knew I had to serve my country, and when I was called to duty I knew I had to go.

**(1, A, 80)**

T: Now by this time—I've also spoken to your brother Guadalupe, and your father had passed away already by this time. It was just your mother. How did your mother feel about a number of her boys going into the service?

S: She figured we were living here in the US and this was our country, so she thought it was our duty to defend it.

T: Did you feel that she was, that she worried about the boys going into the service?

S: Oh, yes. She did. We knew that. At that time she was kind of sickly but then she said if Uncle Sam calls, it's your duty to go.

T: Was your mother an American citizen by this time or not?

S: No, she never became.

T: But being born here, of course you were an American citizen.

S: Yes.

T: You went for Basic Training to Florida. Was that a new part of the country for you? Florida?

S: Yes. At the time I never went out of Wyoming, to like, into Minnesota for to visit my other sister. At that time, being a farm worker you didn't do any travel. You stayed in one locale all the time and you didn't travel from one state to another.

T: The South, a different part of the country, different culture maybe. How did you adjust to being in the South? Was that a good experience for you?

S: It was a great experience because even in World War II they were still fighting the Civil War, there in the South.

T: How did you notice this? How did that impact you? That idea about still fighting the Civil War.

S: We'd just argue about it. All of us being in the US Army, we'd always say: we always had to stick together because we all had one common enemy now. The Civil War was way behind so we had to forget about it. But every once in a while we'd get involved in the barracks about it. Because we had a lot of Southerners, especially when I was in St. Petersburg.

T: And was there kind of an antagonism between Northerners and Southerners that you recall?

S: Oh, yes there was. Quite a bit.

T: Was it that sort of Civil War issue or were there other things that people kind of grated on?

S: I think it was mostly the Civil War issue. Because, as you know, in World War II the colored were segregated so we didn't have any colored units with the American units. The colored were segregated from the whites. They weren't barracks...

T: So you didn't see blacks at all really.

S: No.

T: How about this? Let me ask you as a Mexican-American. How did you perceive people treating you?

S: I was treated fine. In the Air Force, like I say, you had to have a pretty good I.Q. to be flying to begin with and there wasn't very many Mexican-Americans flying at the time. There were a lot, an awfully lot of Mexican-Americans in the regular Army. In fact down South, the majority of the soldiers from down South are Mexican-Americans. But in the Air Force there were few and far between.

**(1, A, 130)**

T: So you were really one of only a handful...

S: I was the only Mexican in my whole squadron.

T: Wow. How, in any way, were you discriminated against by certain people because of your last name? Velasquez is clearly a Mexican name.

S: While I was in the US Army I wasn't discriminated. I was treated equal. In fact, I was in the Air Force, there was ten of us in a plane. We functioned as a family. So if one of us got into trouble, we all got into trouble. We all helped each other.

T: So it was a close-knit group.

S: Yes it was.

T: So I hear you saying that although clearly the Army discriminated against blacks, that as a Mexican you didn't feel this from other men or from the Army as an institution.

S: No. Like I said, the only trouble I had in the Army was when I first went in here at Fort Snelling. That major said...

T: The guy giving you the exam. Giving you that test you mean.

S: Other than that, everywhere I went I was treated the same as anybody else.

T: And he, basically, to recount this on the record, he basically said that because you were Mexican you must have cheated to get such a high score.

S: Yes, because he says Mexicans weren't that smart.

T: How did that make you feel when he said something like that?

S: I thought I just had to prove him wrong. But once I got with the rest of the crew I was treated, everybody was treated alike.

T: That's good to hear. Now being away from home. You had a big family. You grew up with a lot of brothers and sisters. How was it for you being away from home for the first time?

S: The first time I missed my sisters because I was close to my sisters all the time. But I used to write to my sisters all the time. At least twice a week.

T: Do you remember being homesick at all?

S: No. Not very. Because I knew at that time we were at war and we were all in the same boat.

T: This Basic Training experience. It's marching and shooting and exercises and all this.

S: Like I say, that was a breeze for me. Because, like I say, I was fresh out of high school and in high school I was in sports all the time, so physically I was fine. I wasn't a city kid. I could run. I could walk. In fact, one time in Basic Training a sergeant challenged me on a run and he told me I had to do a five mile run. I said fine. I said, but I know something about the Army: if you say I have to go on a five mile run, you have to go on the same five mile run as I do because Army regulations says you cannot give an order unless you can do it yourself.

T: You told him that?

S: I told him that. I knew a little bit about the Army because I was in the National Guard. I said you cannot give an order unless you can do it yourself. So I said you gave me an order for a five mile run. I said, let's go. So we went on a five mile run and he couldn't keep up with me. Because up in the mountains I was training high altitude, and in lower altitude I could run circles [around] practically everybody.

**(1, A, 195)**

T: Did that have any kind of negative repercussions?

S: No. No. He was honest about it. He just shook my hand and he said, "Thanks for the lesson."

T: I think he might have said more than that. Now in the Air Corps, when did you learn that you were going to be flying or that you were going to be a gunner?

S: I didn't know that I was going to be a gunner til I actually went to gunnery school. Because I knew I had to pass all these schools before I could be a gunner. I wanted to be a flier, and they told me [when I first joined the Air Force] I had to go through all the different schools, and they told me I had to be in the upper ten percent from

each school in order to graduate from one school to the other. So I didn't know I was going to be flier till the last school I went into.

T: And you mentioned before we started to tape that you were at a field, Buckley Field, Colorado, at Lowry in Colorado. At Lowry you were actually learning gunnery. Is that correct?

S: Yes.

T: When you learn to be a gunner, how do you learn to do that? What's the school like?

S: They teach you ground exercise first. Before you go up in the air they want to know if you can stand high altitudes so they put you in a pressure chamber. They monitor you. See how you can stand the high altitudes. So you go a couple of months that you go in this high pressure chamber off and on to see how [you react.] Some people can't stand high altitude so they're disqualified.

T: Right. That would be the first thing they would have to check.

S: Yes.

T: What kind of schooling was there? Was there book learning as well as...

S: A lot of book learning. A lot of mathematics, because to be a gunner you have to know how a projectile works. You have to know the...

T: Trajectory, these kind of things.

S: Trajectory. Yes. And you also have to know how air resistance works against a projectile. So you have to do a lot of equations to find out how your bullet is going to go from here to there at a certain speed because you have to be flying at different speeds and you have to know how fast the other people are flying. You have to know how fast you're going. You have to know the wind resistance. So you have to take that all into consideration before you know if you're going to hit the target or not.

T: So it's a lot more to it than just pointing and shooting.

S: Physics and mathematics.

T: Did that come naturally for you? Were you pretty good at math?

S: I was tops in math. In fact, [at] the high school that I went, there was four of us that when we graduated out of junior high school, we had math classes and I was one of the top in math and the teacher asked us if any of us wanted to have higher

learning in math and four of us wanted higher learning in math for our senior year. So the school hired a special teacher for four of us.

T: Really? So math was something you were already good at. And you did real well on that entrance test, you said, at Fort Snelling as well.

S: Yes.

T: The training at Kingman, Arizona, was actually shooting then, wasn't it?

S: Air to air.

T: Was that in a B-XVII or in a different kind of plane?

**(1, A, 246)**

S: No. It was a different kind of plane. In Kingman we didn't have B-XVIIIs. We had AT-6s and AT-18s. The AT-6 was a single engine plane and the AT-18 was a twin engine plane.

T: And you could practice as a gunner in a plane like that?

S: Yes. Air to air. They give you an ammunition belt and then on the ammunition belt you dip it in like ink...

T: Something that would color the bullets?

S: Color the tip of the projectile and every fifth one is a tracer. So one gunner has blue, one gunner has white, one gunner has green. Different colors. Because when you're shooting air to air there's a plane flying and he's trailing a sleeve. A sleeve the size of a plane. Consequently different gunners shoot at that sleeve and when you hit that, your color...

T: So they can see how accurate you've been when they take the sleeve back down to the ground.

S: So the first time I went up there, like I said, every fifth one is a tracer, I found out that I was doing very poor because a tracer does not take the same trajectory as an armor piercing. So I came back the next day. I threw all my tracers away. I put all armor piercing. So then the first time I was using my tracer as the way my bullets were flying. I figured here on every fifth one, if my tracer is hitting that target I'm losing the other four. They're not going anywhere near because it's got a different trajectory. So I took my tracers away and used armor piercing and I was realizing all my sites because I was trained on my sites. How to shoot off that. So I had an extraordinary...



T: You did okay.

S: Yes.

T: You weren't in a ball turret yet.

S: No. No. That was on an AT-6, and open...

T: So you're shooting out the back of this.

S: Yes. And the sleeve was three hundred yards away.

T: When did you find out you were going to be in the ball turret of the plane?

S: When I was assigned to a crew.

T: And that was, you mentioned, a little bit later. Salt Lake City, was that?

S: Salt Lake City, Utah. I was the last one to arrive at Salt Lake City and the rest of my crew was already assembled there.

T: Had they already picked their jobs or been assigned?

S: Yes. Basically yes. So I got there and I presented my credentials to my pilot, because the pilot is the boss. He looked at me and he says, "Simon," he says, "I see you're a number one gunner." He says, "You're rated as number one. I already have a number one gunner." I said, "Well, there's my credentials." I said, "I just got out of school and they sent me over here to give my credentials to you. There's my qualifications." So then he called the other guy and he says, "Let me see your credentials." He says, "Yours doesn't say number one. How come?" "Oh," he says, "Because I was here first." He says, "No, no. Simon's credentials say he's a number one gunner. He's in charge of all the other men because he's got higher qualifications than you. So Simon," he says, "Take any position you want except the upper turret."

T: This means you could be a side gunner, a tail gunner, or a ball turret gunner.

S: But I couldn't be an upper turret because the upper turret is right next to the pilot and the upper turret belongs to the crew chief. Because he's trained to do all the motor work. So then I chose the ball turret.

**(1, A, 300)**

T: Why did you choose [ball turret] as opposed to a waist gunner, of which there are two, or the tail gunner?

S: Protection.

T: Can you explain that on tape? Because it seems to me [when] I look at a plane with a ball turret, looks like you're sitting right out there exposed.

S: So everybody's afraid of that but they don't realize that the ball turret is a sphere. And anytime anything hits a sphere, unless they hit it a direct hit it will go through, but anytime you hit a sphere it will always glance off. Because it's round.

T: Now describe the space you were in. Because I've seen one of these planes and that space looks very small.

S: The ball turret is thirty-nine inches in diameter. Thirty-nine inches. So the circumference is bigger but the diameter is only thirty-nine inches, so you almost have to be in the fetus position to be in the ball turret. You're in this, kind of hunched over.

T: How did you get in this ball turret? Describe the process of just getting in the plane and getting in this thing.

S: There's an opening about eighteen inches, a square opening.

T: In the floor of the plane?

S: There's a big opening on the floor of the plane the size of a ball turret. But on the ball turret itself, there's a lid eighteen inches square that you can open and get in. And once you get in you lock it, and you're locked in. Your ball turret can go one hundred eighty degrees in azimuth and three hundred eighty degrees in circumference.

T: So you can spin really all the way around.

S: All the way around.

T: Do you get in the plane first and then get in the ball turret?

S: Yes.

T: Where did you get in the plane?

S: There's a side door to get into the plane. In the rear. So you go in the side door and the pilot and copilot, there's another door on the front where they can, from the bottom they can...

T: That's right. Underneath. So there are two main entrance and exits.

S: But the regular main entrance is on the side, which is a regular door.

T: So you would get in there. Now, were you in the ball turret the whole flight or only when you were over enemy territory?

S: You get in after you cross the English Channel. Then you'd have to get in there. And you're in there from eight to nine hours.

**(1, A, 328)**

T: So you must have had oxygen hookups down there, radio hookups...

S: Yes. Radio. You've got oxygen, your radio.

T: Now my daughter, who's ten, the first time she saw one of these ball turrets, she said, "Where do they go to the bathroom?" And I told her I would ask you this so...

S: *(laughs)* You can roll yourself out, and they call it a Pitot Tube. They have a regular, like a funnel, in the rear of the plane there, and it goes out waste. Liquid it goes out waste. But if you have to go a number two, you can actually go in the plane and it freezes right away because you're flying twenty, twenty-four thousand feet it goes all the way from zero to sixty-four below zero.

T: So it freezes. Now just thinking about urinating on the plane. Does that freeze right away too?

S: Oh, yes.

T: So the little tube, does that work?

S: Yes. Because it's only just a few inches from there to the outside.

T: Now when you're in the ball turret can you rotate it and get yourself out, or were you dependent upon somebody else to open the door?

S: No. It's electrical. It's got about ten different electric motors made by Sperry, and you can spin that around in any position that you want.

T: And the controls to spin it, hand controls?

S: Hand controls. Two controls. And on the top of your controls there's a switch that's for your guns. Electrical solenoids. So your guns are fired electrically. You're not firing...

T: So there's not a trigger, per se.

S: No. They're electric solenoids.

T: So you had to become pretty adept to moving the up and down and back and forth as well as firing the guns.

S: Yes. Because you fire your guns with your thumb.

T: And you moved the controls with your fingers?

S: Just like a tractor. Up and down.

T: Like a handle or a steering wheel?

S: You have two handles. You could go this way. Any way you move your hands, that's the way your turret rotates.

T: Was it hard to get good at that?

S: Oh, yes. You have to practice. And you have to go fast because those planes they're not standing still. So you have to really know...

T: You must move very fast then.

S: Real fast. And they are fast. And there's a lot of misconceptions about a ball turret. A lot of people say, in fact, they've written books about it and some guys have written books that they have shot part of the planes off. They cannot do that on a ball turret because a ball turret had automatic stops. You cannot hit any part of your plane because there's automatic stops.

T: So there's points when you might actually hit the plane, it won't fire.

S: It won't fire because you can see your propellers, your wings and part of your tail. You can see from your ball turret. But once that comes to that particular spot it automatically stops.

T: The same must be true for that top turret because it could see the tail.

S: Yes.

**(1, A, 362)**

T: I see.

S: And all of that, you were probably in school like gunnery school like where I went to, you're taught to know how to regulate those stops.

T: So you had to set those yourself, in a way?

S: I had to check everything.

T: You had to get it right, I guess.

S: You had to.

T: When you met your crew, now this is in Salt Lake City, Utah, talk about your crew and the people that were on it.

S: My pilot was originally a West Point man. He was from New Jersey. My copilot, his father was a minister from Georgia. My bombardier he was also from the East. I don't know where exactly he was from and my navigator, he was also from the East.

T: These are all commissioned officers, right?

S: All commissioned officers.

T: Bombardier, navigator, pilot, copilot. Now I know that you were enlisted. The two waist gunners were enlisted?

S: Everybody was enlisted other than the pilot, copilot, navigator, and bombardier.

T: So six enlisted and four officers. How did your crew get along with each other as far as interpersonal relations?

S: Just like brothers. In fact, a lot closer than brothers because there wasn't anything that—if somebody asked you for something there were no questions about it. If you had it, you give it to him. If somebody picked on you, the other guy, he'd take care of you.

T: So you had a very close relationship.

S: Yes.

T: How about between officers and enlisted men? You had four officers and six enlisted.

S: Right.

**End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 382.**

T: You talked about officers and enlisted men. Go ahead.

S: When I first got to Salt Lake City everybody introduced themselves to the rest of the group. The pilot, his name was Morris, when it came to the navigator, his name was James Smith, Smith James. So I said, "My name is Simon, how are you, Smitty?" He said, "You call me Mister." I said, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute." He [the pilot] said, "We're all going to be in the same crew." He said, "You're Smitty." He said, "Simon, you can call him Smitty."

T: So you pilot was very... And he's the guy in charge.

S: He was the boss.

T: So he was intent on building a very informal kind of relationship even between officers and enlisted men.

S: That's right.

T: How well did the officers and enlisted men on the plane adjust to that?

S: Right away. We seemed to adjust to it right away. Because we knew we had to depend on each other. So each one had to trust everybody else.

T: You mentioned at first you were in the 379<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group.

S: Yes.

T: Were you already in the group now, or was that only when you were in England that you were assigned to that group?

S: All through training until they came out with Pathfinder equipment.

T: So you were in the 379<sup>th</sup> already at this point.

S: Yes.

T: Did you have people leave your crew and get replacements as you were in this, or was it the same people?

S: The only time you get replacement is when one of your crew gets killed.

T: So otherwise you have the same people...

S: Same crew all along.

T: You were posted overseas and you were based in England and I didn't ask you the name of the town or base you were at.

S: The first base I was in was in Kimbolten, England.

T: Can you spell that? Kimbolten?

S: (*spelling the name*) K-I-M-B-O-L-T-E-N.

T: And were you at more than one base in England?

S: Yes. Then after a few missions when they eliminated my ball turret, I transferred to the 305. In Snottisham, England. That was the paperhangers.

T: That's right. The ones who dropped the leaflets.

S: I didn't like that very well. I transferred to the 384<sup>th</sup>. At Grafton-Underwood, England.

T: So you were at three different bases then.

S: Yes. And I was shot down with the Grafton-Underwood. I wasn't assigned, I was a replacement. I wasn't assigned to a crew.

T: Because you had moved from the 305. Let me ask you this. When you got to England, it's 1943. You flew your first mission you said in November '43. What about the people? Did you have much contact with the civilian population in England?

S: Oh, yes. The civilians were very friendly towards the Americans. We'd go to towns and that. After a while, after we were there for a while, some of the older ones they kind of resented us because we had too much money. See, the English fliers or English Army their pay scale was way below ours.

T: So you were earning much more than they were.

S: A lot more. All the younger men were in North Africa. So very few young Englishmen were in England at the time. The older people kind of resented that, so they used to tell us that, you Yankees! You're overpaid, oversexed and over here.

**(1, B, 464)**

T: Now, I'm thinking as a young man. With a lot of the local young men away, was it easy to meet women over there?

S: Oh, yes. That's why they got mad.

T: Were there friendly relations between young women there and our servicemen, from what you observed?

S: Oh, very much. They had the USOs in England, and they had all the young girls and ladies come to our base and they'd have gatherings, dances and that. Then we'd have parties like Thanksgiving, New Year's and that. We'd take up collections and we'd give as much money and that to the orphanages in England. So they really appreciated that. Appreciated that quite a bit.

T: Did guys that you knew, enlisted guys that you were with, did they, any of them have girlfriends or people they saw on a regular basis?

S: Oh, yes. They had girlfriends. They got to meet people and of course they knew everybody as girlfriend and that.

T: Yourself too?

S: I went out with a couple of them but I didn't meet any girls. Every once in a while we'd get a leave and we'd go to London. One thing that really amazed me, we were in London and in those days the Germans used to come in and bomb London. We weren't used to that.

T: You hadn't been bombed at all before.

S: No. So naturally when the air raids would come we would run to the air raid shelters and that. The English people nonchalant. They'd walk around. Bombs start falling and it didn't bother them very much. But we'd head down for the bomb shelter.

T: When you think about that experience, I'd head down there too.

S: And another thing, like I said, I was expert at armament. When the Germans would come and drop bombs over some of their cities, and a lot of times they had unexploded bombs. The Air Force, if they knew who the armament people were, and I was one of the experts at armament, so a lot of times they would call us in to disarm those unexploded bombs.

T: So you were doing more than just flying as a gunner.

S: Oh, yes. Being an armorer, we were taught all of that—that's why we went to all those schools.

T: So you knew about bombs as well as guns.

S: Like I say, my MOS was six-twelve, and six-twelve is armament. So anything that has to do with armament I was supposed to be an expert at it. Because I went through all their schools. What they used to do, we used to be on the phone; if a bomb fell say about a block away you go down there and try to disarm it, but I was



hooked up to a phone and there was somebody about half a block away in a bunker and we were hooked together.

T: So you actually had to disarm some of these German bombs sometimes.

S: And each process we were doing we'd be on the phone telling them what was doing. If that bomb exploded they knew what I did.

T: Wrong? Or what the last thing you did was?

S: The last thing I did.

T: That's encouraging (*laughs*). Can you remember a time specifically when you had to disarm a bomb? Can you talk about that?

S: My first time was in February. Right after I got there in February. We went to London and had a big air raid. They had quite a few bombs that didn't explode [and] they were short on people to disarm them, so they came the next morning and I was called in to see. Because that was volunteer too. The Englishmen, they had all these bombs and they wanted to know if you would go down there. They didn't say you had to do it.

**(1, B, 531)**

T: So it was volunteer. You could have said no.

S: You could say no because that wasn't your primary objective to be there. Like me being supposedly an expert at arming and disarming a bomb, they had already taught me how to do that. So I went down there and the first bomb that I disarmed was a regular German bomb that had, they just had front—what do they call it? The armory in the front where...

T: The fuse?

S: Where the fuse is was up front. When it hit the target, the fuse bent.

T: So it didn't actually go in and make the bomb explode.

S: So a fuse is just like a trigger on a gun.

T: Does it protrude from the bomb like a wine cork almost and stick out?

S: Yes.

T: And it had to then get pushed in to be detonated.

S: It pushes into the detonator. When it hits the detonator then... What you have to do is be real careful and unscrew and put something in between the detonator and the trigger device.

T: And then it's no good. It won't go off. What goes through your mind when you're fiddling with the fuse of a bomb? I mean, one wrong move in you're in little pieces.

S: Well, actually you don't think about it.

T: Really? What do you think about?

S: You just think about doing your job and doing it right. Because your mind has to be on what you're doing, not...

T: When you disarmed that bomb and made the fuse inoperable, was it after that that you felt nervous or at all...

S: After that.

T: How did you feel when you had actually done it?

S: At the moment you were all right, but after you start walking back and found out if that bomb had exploded you wouldn't be walking back.

T: Yes. That must be when you feel the sense, I don't know, nervousness or... Did you do that more than once, Simon?

S: I did that a couple of times. That's why today I get awful nervous.

T: Because of those experiences you think? Was it one specific experience that left you...?

S: Mostly that. The veterans have what they call PTS, Post Traumatic Syndrome. It relates to things that you did while you were in the service and you know, a lot of times even on your sleep you get nightmares and you remember a lot of things that happened to you while you were in the service. That's why you get those back flashes.

T: Right.

S: Now you go to the VA and go see a psychiatrist and you go talk to him and one actually told me that there was nothing wrong with me because my mind was so clear that I could remember all of that thing. So my answer to him was if my mind was a blank and I could not remember what happened to me I wouldn't get those flashbacks. I told him, "Think about it!" I said you learn yours from the book and mine is from experience. To this day a lot of them... You know you go to a

psychiatrist, especially at the VA. They don't want to own up to that you have a clear mind. They want to think that you don't remember nothing. But my answer to them is if I did not remember anything that happened to me I wouldn't have those flashbacks. And once in a while you get those flashbacks and sometimes they're bad.

**(1, B, 590)**

T: Have you had flashbacks ever since the war?

S: Oh, yes. We all get them.

T: Is that something that happened a lot at the beginning and less in years after, or do they come pretty regularly for you?

S: It comes pretty regular. As long as you have a clear mind. It will always be there.

T: What kind of images come back for you? Is it disarming bombs, or being in a ball turret, or is it being in the POW camp?

S: Mostly all mine [center around] when my plane blew up and a lot of them when I saw a lot of people being killed on that march.

T: At the very end, before you were released. So you have very specific things that you recall. The POW stuff we'll get to later. Let me ask: you flew a number of those missions, the so-called paper hangers, where you weren't—you weren't a gunner on those missions were you?

S: No.

T: But you flew what looks like twenty or so missions where you were actually a ball turret gunner.

S: Yes.

T: Do you remember the first mission that you flew?

S: The first mission I went to was Port of Calais. They said it was a milk run because Port of Calais is right over the English Channel, on the coast. So you'll only be in enemy territory in less than an hour. So you go up there and come back. They used to do that for all rookie crews. They used to go over there. They would send them on what they used to call milk runs, on a mission that was supposedly be an easy mission.

T: Sort of get your feet wet.

S: Yes. Well, we went on my first mission (*sighs*). And then God-danged Germans, they threw everything at us that one day. We came back we had holes all over my plane. There was flak all over the place.

T: Were there fighter planes too?

S: No. Just flak. So I came back and I was ready to quit. If they call this a milk run!!! So then the rest of the people that had flown a lot of missions, they didn't know what happened they said, because they had never flown [a mission] over Calais before that had that much flak. That must have been a new target that they had there that you guys went over, because before that they didn't have that much resistance over Calais. Well, this time, man, they had holes all over our plane. All I could hear was all that...

T: You could see it too I guess, couldn't you?

S: Yes. I could see it and hear it hitting on that ball turret. But of course, being my ball turret it was all being deflected, but I said if I wasn't in a ball turret... And in fact, one of my waist gunners got the Purple Heart. For the very first mission.

T: That's encouraging. I'm thinking as a gunner, when there's planes you can shoot back at them and that's at least some defense. When there's flak, you can't do anything.

S: You can't do nothing.

**(1, B, 628)**

T: What do you think of? What goes through your mind when flak is going off around you?

S: Nothing, actually. Because in the first place, when you go through a flak field all you can see is those big puffs, and they're bursting all around you.

T: Can you hear them too?

S: Oh, yes. And then when they hit... You're doing what they used to call St. Vitus Dance because the airplane is, you know when that burst comes close, it jars the plane and your plane goes up and down and then pieces of flak start hitting your plane. Then we used to go through, why, to this day I never know, we used to go through the Ruhr Valley in Germany. The Ruhr Valley is between two mountains, and it's the valley between Calais and Frankfurt where all the industrial section of Germany was at the time. They must have had all kinds of industry there but we used to fly over it every day. And why we never went around it, I don't know. But we used to go through that valley and man, that flak from both sides of the mountain. It used to come in. We'd be under flak for over an hour.

T: Now from your perspective, was the flak a greater threat than German fighter planes?

S: I thought it was. Because when we went through a flak area there was very little fighters because even the German fighters didn't want to go through the flak area.

T: Because it could easily shoot them down too. Right. That first mission, which sounds like quite an introduction, how did you feel when you got back and got out of the plane? What kind of emotions would you describe for yourself?

S: First thing they did when you got out of that plane, the first thing they did was give you a shot of brandy, to settle your nerves. But me not being a drinker, I'd get a shot of water and give my brandy to somebody else.

T: So you weren't a drinker in the service either.

S: No. I wasn't a drinker or smoker so that helped afterwards, when I was a POW. Like I say, they'd give you that shot of brandy. Then we'd go into an interrogating room. And in that interrogating room there was four officers and they'd ask you questions from the time that you left the base until the time you came back. You gave them a report of everything you saw and everything that went around you.

T: They wanted to know the details as quickly as they could get them from you.

S: Yes. How many planes you saw. How many planes were shot down. How many planes you shot at and if you hit anything.

T: Did you have cameras on your guns?

S: Some of us had cameras. I had a camera on mine.

T: So they could take a look at that.

S: Yes.

T: Now that first mission, did you use your guns at all?

**(1, B, 664)**

S: No. Not on my very first mission.

T: Do you remember the first time you used your guns on a mission?

S: I think it was over Frankfurt. We were hitting a railroad marshalling yards and as we came into the marshalling yards we went into a bomb run, and then that's when a whole bunch of ME-109s hit us.

T: Now describe that. When fighter planes hit your squadron or your group, what actually happens and what do you see?

S: Mainly when the planes come in they come in from above.

T: So you're the last person to see them.

S: Yes. It's the bombardier, the navigator, or the upper turret are the first ones that see it and they tell you what direction they're coming from, at what speed they think they're coming from, at what angle they're coming from. So by the time, if they come under you, you've got a very good idea where to pick them up.

T: So you'd have to sort of wait till they passed into your line of sight.

S: Yes.

T: They can't be in your line of sight for more than a split second.

S: About two or three seconds at the most.

T: And you have to try to hit them.

S: Right away.

T: How difficult was it to hit planes?

S: It was very hard because by the time they came into me... ME-109s had armor plate underneath. They were all good fighters that had been fighting against us for a long, long time. But by the time they came to my line of sight, all I could see was their belly. I could see my rounds hitting them, but all I could see was bouncing. You could see them hit, but it wouldn't penetrate because they had that armament that was protecting them.

So this one time, I think I was on about my fourth mission. I went to a target they called Overhoffenpoffen [spelling?] and they had a bunch of fighters. They called them the Abbeville Kids. They were a squadron under General Göring. They called them the Abbeville Kids because they used to be way out of range and do all kinds of acrobatic distraction. Then they would come in rolling under you. Hardly anybody would hit them. Because they were that good. One of them came under me and as he came rolling I got my sights on him before he completed his roll and I got his engines and blew him out of the sky.

T: Now was that something you got on your camera too?

S: Yes. So I got the Air Medal for that. For shooting the plane down.

T: How did your crew feel about that? Suddenly they've got a guy who's shooting a plane out of the sky?

S: Any time you hit a plane you have to have confirmation not only from your crew, you have to get confirmation from the planes that are flying by your sides.

T: So your camera isn't enough evidence for that?

S: No. Because there can be more than one that hit that plane. So you have to get confirmation from your crew [and] confirmation from your side planes. So I got down and we went through interrogation, and I told them that I was almost positive that I had shot that one plane down. I said you can take my cameras, I'm almost positive that I did hit him. It just so happened that the guys they were interrogating next to ours said, we say Simon hit that plane and blew him out of the sky. So I got confirmation and I was the first one in our group to shoot down what they called the Abbeville Kids.

T: Was that the only plane you shot down?

**(1, B, 716)**

S: No. I shot a couple more down. But I didn't get a hundred percent confirmation. I had help on that.

T: So they give you like a half for a credit like that?

S: Yes. I didn't get full credit.

T: As a gunner, is that something that gunners kept track of? How many planes they'd shot down?

S: Oh, yes.

T: So you knew when you talked to other gunners, that's something you talked about?

S: Oh, yes.

T: Was there kind of a pride in having more than the next guy?

S: Oh, yes because you were always fighting for proficiency. See how good of a gunner you were. And a lot of times you'd go up there and a lot of times the gunner would freeze. He thought he was firing but yet he wasn't pulling his triggers.

T: You have to push the thumbs down, don't you?

S: Yes. They'd freeze on his guns and you could hear somebody else firing but you know who's firing and who's not. From their position.

T: You mentioned that mission, your first mission, the first mission you shot somebody down. From a perspective of being scared or fear, not including your last mission, what was perhaps the most difficult mission for you? When were you most scared on a mission? Not the last one.

S: I think our long missions, because there were some missions that we had to go eight, nine, ten hours, and then being in the air that long you're fighting the cold. You're fighting all the elements. You're fighting the flak. You're fighting the enemy fighters. So you have to go through a lot to come back. Being under so much pressure, that many hours under pressure... You actually don't feel it until after you come back home.

T: Is there a letdown almost? You stay tense and ready while you're in the air, and then when you get back you kind of...

S: After. When you come back home and after you go to interrogation, then you start shaking. After you get back. But while you're in the air, you're so busy doing things to stay alive.

T: Now you went on a number of missions. Were there missions where you saw other planes get knocked out of the air?

S: Oh, yes. Quite a few.

T: How does that affect you?

S: You know the crews that are shot down and actually...

T: Because they're real people to you. You know these guys.

S: They're real people to you. Like I say, you don't really think nothing about it because you're so busy doing your job that you don't have time to think until after you get back.

T: But then people are missing.

S: Yes. And then a lot of times you get back and some of those planes are shot up so bad you go down there and see their remains of some of your friends that you actually knew.



T: The plane got back but they were killed on it.

S: Yes.

**(1, B, 751)**

T: How tough is that?

S: That's tough. Real tough.

T: Was anybody ever hit on board your plane? When you flew a lot of missions.

S: My last one. And then the first one where the side gunner was hit with flak.

T: The first mission. Boy, what an introduction. Now you were there almost six months before you were shot down. You flew twenty-seven missions. That means you had a lot of days where you didn't fly missions.

S: Yes.

T: How did you pass the time? How did you kill all the extra time?

S: After you complete seven missions they give you seven days [of] what they call R and R. They fly you to a rest area and you don't do nothing. Your time is your own. If you want to sleep twenty-four hours a day that's up to you. You do whatever you want to do. Your time is yours. For seven days.

T: Did you find after seven missions, did you feel yourself to be kind of adjusted to this life as an air crewman?

S: I think you get adjusted right away.

**End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.**

T: You said you get adjusted right away, you feel.

S: Yes. Because your commanding officers are pretty straightforward with what's going on and they tell you the truth. Like they tell you that your life expectancy is very little. That they know that you're not coming back and it's only the very few that are coming back. But you as an individual, nothing's going to happen to me.

T: Now do you really say that? Because I've heard other guys say the same thing? You hear the evidence which says you're not, probably not going to make it. You really think it's not going to be you?

S: That's right. We had a saying that the bullet that has your name on it is there, but the one that you really have to watch out is the one that says: "To whom it may concern."

T: That's interesting. Did you, were you kind of a fatalist? Did you think that there was a bullet out there with my name on it that would get me and I'm not going to worry about it?

S: That's right.

T: That's a pretty healthy way, I think, in a sense...

S: And I think all the survivors are that way. They always thought that nothing was going to happen to them. Because if you went with the fear that something was going to happen to you, you weren't going to do your job right.

T: I'm wondering. It sounds like there's possibility of real mental stress here, of worrying about missions. Were there guys that you observed who did crack, who were not up to the stress?

S: There were some, but see, when you go through training, a lot of that I think is psychological, and I think a lot of it is mental, and they teach you that you're going to come back, and they teach you that you're going to survive and nothing's going to happen to you. Everything is going to be all right. Consequently if you do your job right, you're going to come back.

**(2, A, 41)**

T: So they build in a sense of optimism almost. That you are...

S: Kind of brainwashed.

T: When you look back on it now do you think you were brainwashed? Is that what they were doing to you?

S: I think so.

T: In what way? The optimism way?

S: The optimism way because we were all young. When you're young nothing's going to happen to you.

T: You were twenty-two, twenty-three in training, weren't you?

S: Yes. And I was one of the older ones. A lot of them were a lot younger than I was.

T: That's right. You were born in 1920, so by the time you got over to Europe you were twenty-three, almost twenty-four years old.

S: Yes.

T: You were one of the older ones. Did they have to move guys in other crews, move guys out who couldn't handle the stress sometimes?

S: Yes. There were a few that cracked. The hospital was actually... I don't know what ever became of them, but there was quite a few that cracked.

T: What do you notice about people? Does their behavior change or do they...?

S: Behavior changes. They wouldn't fly off the handle. It was mostly that they were inward. They kept everything to themselves and they just, they wouldn't talk. They, a lot of them, went into a shell like.

T: I think you mentioned that nobody in your crew was affected like that.

S: No. No. I was the only one in my crew that was shot down. All my regular crew, the other men, they all came back.

T: But you switched units, didn't you?

S: Yes.

T: And that's why you were not with them anymore.

S: Yes.

T: How is it that you got out of the 379<sup>th</sup>, your first group, into that 305<sup>th</sup>? How did you switch?

S: Because they eliminated my ball turret. The Pathfinder [radar] equipment.

T: Right. So this kind of radar equipment meant that your job was no longer there. You had to switch.

S: Yes.

T: How tough was that leaving the guys you had trained with?

**(2, A, 82)**

S: It was tough because you no longer knew everybody. You were no longer a family that took care of each other.

T: You joined another family?

S: Another family.

T: Now on a plane where [you completed] these night missions with the 305<sup>th</sup>, these leaflet missions, what was your job with them?

S: Dump leaflets out.

T: Now you describe this mission with the flak and that does not sound like a lot of fun. These leaflet missions, they sound pretty easy. How come you got out of that line of work?

S: I didn't like that night flying because it was all done in darkness with no moon or nothing out.

T: You couldn't see anything.

S: You couldn't see nothing. The takeoff wasn't bad. Coming in for a landing on a dark night was kind of scary.

T: Where did you sit in the plane like that? It had no gunners, right?

S: No. It was a little area where the radioman was and they had a place up in there [to] sit down in there when you were landing.

T: So you went up and then you got over a location and just dumped these leaflets out?

S: Yes.

T: Did the plane frequently go by itself, or was there escort planes, or...

S: We never had any escort.

T: Just by yourself?

S: Yes. Because at night nobody could see us, supposedly.

T: Did you ever get shot at with a plane like that?

S: Oh, with radar. The Germans had very good radars. So that flak was coming up whether day or night. Their visual gunners weren't shooting, but the radar was.

T: You switched to the, or you got out of that and were sent to the 384<sup>th</sup> Bomb group and you flew the rest of your missions with them. You were a replacement there, right?

S: Yes.

T: Which meant you flew with lots of different people.

S: Yes. You didn't fly with the same people every time. Once or twice maybe with the same crew. Normally you flew as a spare gunner.

T: So somebody picked you up who needed a ball turret gunner.

S: Yes. Ball turret was shot up or he got sick or something. You had to replace him.

T: Now for you this is a very different experience. Instead of flying with a family you're just kind of...

S: You flew with somebody you never knew.

T: How was that? Was that a different experience?

S: It was very... like I said, because there was no more camaraderie between you. Because you didn't know the people. You hadn't flown with them before. All the spare gunners were bivouacked in a different room.

**(2, A, 127)**

T: Was it a tent or cabin?

S: No. It was a Quonset hut.

T: So you were with other gunners in like a pool, and they would come in and say, we need x number of gunners. You flew a lot of missions in that situation, didn't you?

S: Yes.

T: Not really knowing the crew, did that make it a different experience in a way?

S: It does. Because you didn't actually know what they were like. You didn't know how much experience they had, and that made a lot of difference. You didn't know how much training they had. A lot of them didn't have as much training as you did.

T: So they could have been brand new crews, right?

S: Yes. That's what happened to me when I got shot down. It was a brand new crew.

T: A brand new crew. This was at Grafton-Underwood. That was the last place you were. What about when you weren't flying missions? There were more days when you didn't fly than when you did.

S: Every so often you would get a pass. You would go into London and spend a couple of days there. Then you fly back or [take] a train.

T: Was it close to London? Grafton-Underwood. Was that close to London?

S: No. That was right in about the middle of the isle.

T: So it took a number of hours by train. What did you think of London as a town? That's kind of a different question...

S: They had different clubs. They had NSO clubs and different entertainment clubs that the Army had and the English had for the fliers. Then if you wanted to go see different areas of the town you could take it on your own. Just go out.

T: Did you like going to London?

S: Quite a bit because as you know London has an underground rail system. Next to France I think is one of the world's best.

T: It's very extensive. Yes. The Tube. When you first got over to England you were with your own crew and, in a sense, that's a group to hang out with. When you were at Grafton-Underwood you didn't have a crew that you were part of. Did you make friends there or were you more of a loner?

S: You'd try to find somebody to be friends with. Then a lot of times you would be friendly with somebody and the next day he wouldn't be there.

T: How did you deal with that? Did you not make friends or...

S: That was mostly you want to be alone from then on. You kind of shy away from... Because I had a couple of different friends that I met that I got real friendly with and then pretty soon they were shot down and they weren't there anymore. You kind of miss them.

T: You mentioned a sense of it's not going to be me. Does that change when you watch people around you disappear?

S: Not so because you say I know it happened to him but it won't happen to me because I've got too much experience.

T: You begin to believe that...

S: Yes.

T: Now as you count missions, and you were counting, ultimately counting towards thirty-five, you made it to twenty-seven. Does it get easier or more difficult when you have all those missions done?

S: I think it becomes more difficult once you're starting, you know you have a long ways to go. But once you get closer to the time you're going to come home... I only got five or six or seven more missions and then I'm coming home...

T: Let me ask you this. You got over to England at the end of '43. November '43 you flew your first mission. April '44 you flew your last one. When you look at Simon Velasquez when he got there and in April, six months later, how was he a different person?

S: How was I a different person? At the time I thought I had enough, more, experience in aerial gunnery at the time. I figured as you go along and get more flights, you get more experience. You know more about what the enemy is going to do, which angle he is going to try to come in.

T: When you think about the flights that you made, did you use your guns on most flights, some flights, or...

S: Most flights. Most flights I was firing quite a bit.

T: You were never wounded other than your last mission.

S: On my last mission.

T: Was your plane hit with gunfire? When fighter planes came by, did they hit your plane sometimes?

S: Oh, yes. Quite a few.

T: But you were underneath though, weren't you?

S: Yes.

T: And you shot down a couple planes yourself, you mentioned.

S: Yes.

T: So there was action in the air, wasn't there?

S: Quite a bit. Action all the time. Always something to do. Like I say, there was always action because if you weren't under flak fire you were under enemy fire.

T: So when the flak was on at least the fighters weren't, and vice versa.

S: Yes. Because the flak you couldn't do anything about it. You just had to ride.

T: That would be terrible.

S: When the fighters were coming at you, you could fight back.

T: And you saw fighters regularly.

S: Oh, yes. Because at the time I was there the Luftwaffe was more in its glory because their strength was almost full strength. Each time we went up in the air we used to shoot down quite a few of them, so each time we went in we'd shoot them down and they didn't have replacements for it.

T: And they had to replace planes and pilots. When you were there until April '44 the Germans were still in France, so they could come up rather early or rather late in your run.

S: Yes. Yes.

**(2, A, 213)**

T: Let's move to your last mission, which is the last thing I'm going to talk to you about today. Do you remember a lot about that particular mission?

S: I remember all of it.

T: Let me ask you to start from the beginning. What was the target for that day?

S: We were going to the city of Schweinfurt, which was a ball bearing factory. Everything that runs even today runs on ball bearings.

T: They had the biggest plants in the country there at Schweinfurt.

S: Schweinfurt was the largest ball bearing factory in Germany. And it was also way deep into Germany. They called it the maximum mission because we had to go from ten to ten and a half hours.

T: Is that about the maximum range of your plane?

S: That was the maximum.



T: On that particular day what crew were you flying with?

S: A new crew for me. That particular day I was supposed to be on leave. That particular day that I was shot down, I was on leave and I found out this one particular crew, their ball turret gunner supposedly got sick. So I volunteered to take his place.

T: You volunteered to take his place.

S: Not knowing that they were green, they had never flown before.

T: This was their very first mission?

S: Their very first mission. The reason I volunteered because I knew we were going to Schweinfurt, and going into Schweinfurt, that's a maximum effort they call it. Maximum effort only experienced crews fly.

T: So you figured they had to be an experienced crew.

S: They had to be an experienced crew but not knowing that we had lost so many planes before that, that they wanted everything that could fly was going to fly that day.

T: So you didn't know they were a new crew until you had already volunteered.

S: Until after I got up into the air.

T: You didn't know til then?

S: That's right. We started flying and you know, how many missions you guys fly? This is our first mission. I say, "What?!!"

T: Let me ask you. When you heard that, how did that make you feel?

S: I told them, you guys better be on your toes when you get up there because the minute we start getting into enemy territory everybody has to be on their toes. Well, how? I said you better start looking for fighters. You better start looking up in the sky see where they're coming from. See how many fighters are coming. See what kind of trouble we're going to get into.

T: Did this, knowing this was their first mission, did that give you an uneasy feeling at all when you got it?

**(2, A, 247)**

S: Not necessarily because I knew that they had to be trained to be gunners in order to be where they were.

T: So they were trained but they just didn't have the experience of flying.

Walk us through the mission from getting into the plane, taking off. Talk about as much as you can about that.

S: It was a beautiful spring day. It was seven o'clock in the morning. I got to the plane first because I was armament man. I was inspecting the plane to make sure that all the armament was secured. My job was to check all the guns and all the bombs. That particular day was like I said, a beautiful spring morning. Meadowlarks out there. They're just singing along. It's going to be a beautiful day. So it's going to be a nice day. The rest of the crew come up and come time to takeoff. We all introduce each other. I had never met them before. I start looking at them and they all outrank me. I was staff sergeant, and they all outranked me. To this day I cannot know how they got their rank. Because they were all master sergeants, a tech sergeant.

T: And you were just a staff sergeant, right?

S: I was just a staff sergeant.

T: They had no missions and they outranked you.

S: They said, you must be new here because... I said, what do you mean "new"? I'm on my twenty-seventh mission. You must have screwed up someplace because you're only a staff sergeant. I said screwed up? I been flying all this time. How can I screw up? I'm on my twenty-seventh mission. How come? They said did your other crew get killed? I said no. I said my turret got eliminated, so that's why I'm flying with you guys because my ball turret was eliminated. They could not understand why I was only a staff and they were all master sergeants.

T: What did you make of that? How come they did outrank you?

S: That bothers me to this day. I don't know why.

T: Had you been passed over for promotion before?

S: Because each time I went from base to base I was supposed to have been promoted, and at that time they claimed that my paperwork hadn't caught up to me yet.

T: Is that acceptable to you, or has it ever occurred to you it's because you're Mexican?

S: No, not necessarily. After a while, you know, now sometimes I think about it. But like I say, I don't know why, but they all outranked me.

T: They all outranked you. They were all white guys?

S: Yes. Like I say, there were very few Mexicans, very few Puerto Ricans. In Stalag XVII there were five thousand, over five thousand two hundred to be exact. Out of five thousand, there were only five Mexicans in the whole prison camp.

T: Back to this beautiful spring day, 13 April. You've got this brand new crew. They outrank you, but they've got no missions. Did things go pretty much normal for you? You're checking the plane.

S: Checking the plane and then we went to the staging area which was up on the north shore. We got to the staging area and then I start looking around and we had one thousand planes in the air that day. And everywhere you looked they had planes. You could look down, you could look up. You look sideways. They were just like bees. Then they got the go ahead that we were cleared to go on the mission. We started to go over the English Channel. I told the rest of the guys to be prepared because, I said, this is a pretty long mission and I think they're going to be waiting for us.

**(2, A, 290)**

T: They didn't even have a milk run under their belt, did they?

S: No. So we went over the English Channel and then nothing happened. Then we went over the Zuider Zee [in northwest Netherlands]. Still nothing happened. And then we started going over the Schweinfurt area. Then all hell started breaking loose.

T: So you made it to the target. The plane made it to the target.

S: Yes. No, we were quite a ways before the target when the fighter hit us. We were under enemy flak and fire for a little better than three hours before we hit the target. The reason I'm alive today is because I ran out of ammunition.

T: You ran out of ammunition? Before you got to the target?

S: Before I got to my target. I have spare ammunition inside the plane. So I rolled myself out to reload.

T: By the way, when you're in your turret, can you wear your parachute?

S: No.

T: So if the plane was hit, you had to somehow get up there.

S: Yes. You wore a harness. And the harness has got two O rings here in the front. You had what they called a chest parachute and you hung it on the rings that are inside the plane.

T: But you had to get up there to get it.

S: You had to get out. There's not enough room to wear either a seat, because it brings you up too high, or a backpack, because you haven't got that much room in the back. All you wore was a harness and a chest chute.

T: And you had to, in case the plane was hit, hopefully roll yourself out and get up there and get this thing and put it on.

S: It only takes a split second to hook yourself in. I ran out of ammo and I got out to reload. I looked up. Both waist gunners were dead.

T: Really? They had been hit, but you couldn't see this, of course.

S: No. I looked and my plane was on fire. I looked up front. I went up front. The pilot and copilot were dead. So I figured it's time for me to get the hell out of here.

T: Now they were all, these guys were all dead already?

S: They were all dead. I hadn't put my chute on yet. So I went back on the catwalk, put my chute back on and tried to get out. The door was jammed.

T: The plane was flying on autopilot now or what?

S: Autopilot. I don't know why the pilot had it on autopilot because we were... I guess the reason he had it on autopilot was because we were on the bomb run.

T: So you were over the target now.

S: Over the target. The door was jammed to get out, and both guys were dead in the waist, so I put my chute on and I took a run at the door to hit it with my shoulder and that's the last thing I know.

T: Really? You must have gone out the door.

S: I take it when I hit that door the plane blew. The plane blew up and I was blown clear.

T: And your chute opened automatically?

S: No. I didn't know how long I had been out. I knew I had been blown out, but I didn't know how long I was out. So I pulled the ripcord and I had only been out just a couple of seconds probably because I was still up where the fighting was going on. I was up at twenty-four thousand feet. It so happened that we were in what they call a jet stream, and the jet stream that day was around two hundred miles an hour. So it blew me over one hundred miles from...

T: From Schweinfurt it blew you one hundred miles?

S: Yes. From where I got shot down to where I landed was pretty close to one hundred miles.

T: Where did you land?

S: I landed way out there between Schweinfurt and Frankfurt. Close to the Rhine River.

T: This whole jet stream thing, I get that, but I guess I didn't realize that you could get, as a parachute, you could get pulled along that too.

**(2, A, 340)**

S: Yes. Your chute is open and that—my chest chute is twenty-four feet. So that's just like a big umbrella. The jet stream hits you and the only thing to bring you down is your weight, but the biggest force is on your chute.

T: How long did it take you to get to the ground?

S: About forty-five minutes.

T: So you had a lot of time just to think. What goes through your mind when you're...

S: I wondering how am I going to get out of here. I was pretty well banged up. But being so cold...

T: It's cold up there.

S: Cold and [with] your adrenaline, you don't feel nothing. Until after you get down. Both my shoulders were dislocated. My legs were all banged up. Vertebrae in my neck were bad and my spine was bad.

T: So you got beat up being blown out of the plane and hitting the ground.

S: My dislocated hip.

T: Is this from being blown out of the plane or from hitting the ground?

S: I think mostly from being blown.

T: You could easily have been in that ball turret and that would have been the end of you.

S: Oh, yes. If I was in the ball turret... Because there were only two survivors, myself and the tail gunner.

T: Did you see him when he bailed out or not?

S: No.

T: He had already gone?

S: I don't know whatever happened to him. Til about a month later I met him at the prison camp.

T: What did he say about how he got out of the plane?

S: He claimed when the plane blew up that the tail section broke. He claimed he glided down.

T: In the tail section?

S: That's what he claimed. He was Hubert Davis.

T: Is that a plausible story that he...

S: Oh, yes. Because the tail section...

T: It's got wings and a stabilizer, doesn't it?

S: It's got the big stabilizer and your wings in the back are pretty long. So it's possible.

T: And everyone else was killed in the plane.

S: Was killed. Even before the plane blew.

T: You mentioned you saw four people, the pilot, copilot and the two gunners. There were two that got out, so there's still some other crew people you must not have seen.

S: Yes.

T: So you were floating towards the ground. Did you think about much stuff that you remember, or were you scared, or...

S: You're just scared and you don't know what's going on. At that altitude you really don't know what's going on because there's no falling sensation.

T: It feels like you're just coasting along?

S: You're just floating along. Actually a lot of times you figure you're going up instead of down.

T: That's a long time to be up in the air.

S: There's no falling sensation even today. You go up and jump down in a parachute, you don't feel any falling sensation until you're about one thousand feet from the ground.

T: Then you can see the ground coming up to you.

S: You can see it coming up. Before that it just...

T: Like you're floating.

S: Just floating up there in thin air.

T: Now for you, and the last thing we'll conclude with today is hitting the ground. What happened as you got closer to the ground? Describe, talk about that part of this.

S: When I hit the ground, [I thought,] how to get away?

T: So you were thinking about this.

S: That's right. So I knew I was pretty well banged up and I knew I couldn't run, so the first thing I knew... I pulled as much of my parachute and hide it. I landed in a wooded area. They were looking for me even that far off.

T: So people could see your parachute coming, I guess, too.

S: And I tell people that somehow or other...

**End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 384.**

T: You tell people that somehow or other...

S: Like animal instincts take over, because you're mind gets so much sharper. Your hearing becomes so much sharper, and your eyesight becomes... You can hear things a mile away almost. Just...

T: So when you hit the ground were you injured at all or were you already...

S: I was already injured.

T: Could you get that parachute off okay?

S: Yes. I got it off and then I started crawling away. I crawled probably one hundred yards away. There was a few bushes. I could hear people coming around and I went in those bushes and crawled under there. To this day I don't know how they missed me, because I was there in plain sight. People were, I'd say, from here to that wall away from me...

T: Fifteen, twenty feet away. That's all. Were they military or civilian?

S: Some were military and some civilians.

T: But they didn't get you right away.

S: They didn't get me right away. So after they all went away from me, I knew where I was. I was on the wrong side of the Rhine River. I was on the German side of the Rhine River. I wanted to get to the French side of the Rhine River because... Before you go on any mission you're interrogated and they give you maps. They give you a compass and they give you an escape kit, which is D bars and stuff to survive and they give you money. Each area—like German marks if you're going through Germany, or francs if you're through France. You get two thousand dollars worth of all that money in your pocket all the time. They tell you once you get into France, the French underground has different signals how to recognize who they are. Like the French would have that clothing that they wash. They put it on their wash lines.

T: So you knew there were certain things you knew to look out for.

S: Yes. Certain way the underwear is hung. Some way that their pants are hung. They're all not the same way. They had different ways. They have a code.

T: And you, suddenly you had to sort of think about this stuff now.

S: I wanted to get to the French side so I could find the French underground. But I couldn't swim.

T: You didn't join the Navy. That's right.



S: I was so well banged up, so I went and I stole a little canoe. The Rhine River at that time of the year is pretty strong in that part...

T: It's spring. That's right.

S: And that part of France it's pretty wide. So I took that little canoe and started rowing and I got to about the middle of it and I was so banged up I just couldn't row anymore, so the current brought me back to the German side and that's where they caught me.

T: So they saw the boat coming and you were...

S: Yes.

T: That was on the same day you were shot down?

S: No. It was about six or seven days after.

T: So for six or seven days you managed to avoid the Germans.

S: Yes.

**(2, B, 455)**

T: How far from the place you were shot down to the place you were captured? Any idea how far you traveled?

S: About thirty miles.

T: So you got part of the way back.

S: Yes.

T: What did you do at night to avoid...

S: I traveled mostly at night. I slept during the day. Slept during the day and steal what I could steal to eat during the day. Travel at night. Because an airman's uniform and that...

T: Somebody would see you right away during the day. So you managed for six or seven days to move. Talk about that a little bit. We wanted to go until when you got captured, but there's a little bit more in this chapter I guess. How did you make your way and how did you avoid these people?

S: Like I say, travel at night and you have a compass. Basically you know where to go. They teach you maps of where to go...

T: And you have a map with you, don't you?

S: Yes. You have maps and you have a compass.

T: So it was a matter of following the maps and just avoiding people there during the day.

S: Yes.

T: For food did you have enough in the emergency supplies, or did you have to steal some, or...

S: You had, I think, three D bars, which are chocolate bars. But they call them D bars, because they're more than chocolate bars. They're supplement with vitamins and that. You could last quite a while with just eating D bars.

T: So you had a little bit of food. Were you scared when you were doing this? Were you tempted to turn yourself in?

S: No. Mostly survive. You have that survival instinct and you want to survive and you can do a lot of things if your life depends on it.

T: Was your fear that if you give up the Germans would kill you, or was it...

S: They told us to be more worried of German youth and the civilians.

T: So you were more scared of people out of uniform.

S: Yes.

T: Had you heard stories about what might happen as an airman?

S: A lot of them. I saw that for a fact that civilians and the German youth could kill a lot of fliers.

T: This was something you needed to be concerned about. When you finally were captured by the Germans, what kind of emotions did you feel at that moment? Were you scared? What was it?

S: Once they captured me and the regular soldiers didn't torture me, I knew I was going to be all right.

T: Because once you were in military control...

S: Yes. But then the ones that captured me... The Germans had a central interrogation center which was in Frankfurt. So I knew I had to go to Frankfurt. But they marched us through those little towns.

T: Were you with other Americans at this time?

**(2, B, 510)**

S: Yes. About four different Americans that they captured at different times.

T: So a small group of you walking.

S: And they marched us through some of these little towns. Civilians, oh, they were terrible. They'd throw rocks at you, spit at you, hit you. Young kids would come and kick you.

T: So you had to march for a number of days then.

S: Yes.

T: Let's conclude there for today because the rest of this is your POW experience and we'll have that during the second time we talk.

S: Okay.

T: Let me thank you for today.

**END OF PART ONE OF INTERVIEW**

**Tape 3, Side A begins at counter 000.**

T: Today is May 28, 2003, and this is our second interview with Simon Velasquez. First, on the record again, thanks very much Mr. Velasquez.

S: I was captured, and I was captured late in the afternoon.

T: It wasn't dark yet though.

S: It wasn't dark yet.

T: Now this wasn't on April 13. April 13 of '44 is the day you were shot down.

S: Five or six, or maybe six or seven days later. I was captured and the Germans had, their main interrogation headquarters was in Frankfurt, Germany. A great big castle right off on the river's edge in Frankfurt, Germany.

T: You were by yourself by this time.

S: I was by myself.

T: What went through your mind at that moment when you were actually physically taken into custody by the Germans? Because you'd been eluding them for several days.

S: I figured as long as I was alive... I didn't put up a fight because it was useless by that time and besides, I didn't have a gun with me anymore. I just gave up and I figured—before I was shot down they told me that after I was taken POW that nine times out of ten I would be treated all right. They said sometimes if some civilians get a hold of you they might abuse you quite a bit or even kill you, but if you put up a fight then you will get shot. If you don't put up a fight they said, you'll be taken prisoner of war and you'll spend the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp.

T: Now you were still in uniform. The uniform you were shot down in.

S: Oh, yes. They used to stress that all the time. If you got shot down, always stay in uniform because if you threw your uniform away and stole civilian clothes, if you were caught in civilian clothes you would be treated as a spy.

T: So as long as you were in uniform then the Geneva Convention rules of POW treatment would apply.

S: That's right.

T: What did you wear now typically? You didn't have on fatigues and a helmet or anything.

S: Yes. You wore protective clothing and then you wore what they call a jumpsuit, a flight suit and then on top of that you had a leather jacket.

T: So this is what you were still wearing? All this stuff.

S: Yes.

T: And you had shoes or boots.

**(3, A, 56)**

S: Boots.

T: So the clothes you had on were okay.

S: Yes.

T: At the time you were captured how long a trip was it to this main interrogation center?

S: I'd say probably one hundred fifty, two hundred miles.

T: How did you get from one place to the other?

S: I was transported by truck. When they first caught me it was late in the afternoon, so they put me in a truck. I was by myself. We went along. They picked up other prisoners of war. Other prisoners that they had caught. It started to get dark, and we weren't too far away from the interrogating center. They stopped at a German base and kept us there overnight. It turned out to be—it was like a brothel. The Germans had...

T: A brothel? Really?

S: Yes. Where the German officers, high ranking officers and that, impregnated young women because they were trying to create a super-race.

T: They kept you overnight at a place like this?

S: Yes. They put us in a room, and we were convicts so we weren't free.

T: How many were you by this time?

S: By that time there was four of us.

T: Did you know any of these other ones?

S: No. I didn't know any of the other fliers. Then too, before we got shot down we were always told, keep your mouth shut. You meet somebody that you don't know, that you haven't been with for a long time, you don't know who they are, they might be Germans trying to get information from you.

T: Like a spy or something.

S: Consequently, you didn't speak to one another about...

T: Even to the other Americans.

S: That's right, because you didn't know. Because some of those Germans they spoke better English than I did. In order to be on the safe side, just kept your mouth shut.

T: Because you didn't know these guys.

S: Didn't know those guys. So the next morning they didn't give us any breakfast. They took us on a truck and started back to Frankfurt, and on the way I think we picked up about three or four more guys during the trip to Frankfurt. Once we got into Frankfurt interrogating center, which was, like I say, a great big castle, right on the Rhine. Of course the interrogators they wanted to know everything about you, but all you kept on saying was name, rank, serial number and the date of birth and that was it.

T: Now that's what you were saying. What kind of questions were they asking you? And were they doing this in English?

S: Yes. Oh, yes. Perfect English. Like I say, in fact, they had more information about me than I knew about myself.

T: Did they really?

S: Oh, yes they did. They knew what outfit I was with, what time I took off. They didn't know though that I was trained in electronics. That's one of the reasons I was safe. Because I had pretty extensive schooling in electronics. If they had known that, I think I would have been in trouble.

### **(3, A, 114)**

T: So here they are. You're telling them name, rank and serial number. What kind of questions were they asking you?

S: What kind of plane you were flying. How high you were flying. What outfit you came from. What schooling you went to. Who the officers were. What kind of bomb

load you had, and how big was your outfit. All technical questions. All you kept on saying was name, rank and serial number. They'd slap you around pretty well.

T: Did they physically...

S: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I got abused pretty well.

T: At that first interrogation.

S: First interrogation. That lasted, oh, it must have been about six or seven hours. By that time...

T: Really? Six or seven hours?

S: Yes. Oh, yes. They promised me the moon. They said, you start talking we'll give you something to eat. Give you coffee. They even said you could have a woman if you want.

T: At that point, probably the furthest thing from your mind, but...

S: And after I wouldn't tell them anything they put me in solitary confinement in a dungeon about four floors down. The dungeon must have been about four by six.

T: That's barely enough room to sit and stand.

S: Yes. That's it. Dark. Cold. Damp. About four, five floors down. When we were at street level. And it was stone cold. They kept me there for twenty-one days.

T: You were in this place in Frankfurt for twenty-one days.

S: I was there for almost forty days. But this first time they kept me there on bread and water for twenty-one days. In that dungeon they had heat sometimes. They had great big floodlights. Sometimes they put them on twenty-four hours a day.

T: In your cell.

S: In your cell. It didn't bother me. When I got sleepy I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

T: You were by yourself here.

S: All by myself. They kept each prisoner separate. In different cells. In solitary confinement. Because there was only one to a cell. And for twenty-one days, one day it would be hotter than blazes, the next day it would be colder than blazes. For a couple of days, two or three days, they'd have floodlights day and night. Then they'd turn them off for two or three days. It would be pitch dark. And bread and water is

all you had. Just to keep alive. Twenty-one days. On the twenty-first day they brought you back up...

T: So there was no contact between you and the Germans for those twenty-one days.

S: None. Yes. No contact whatsoever.

T: What was in this little cell? Was there a toilet or a bed or anything?

S: A little toilet. No bed. You slept on the ground. They kept you there for twenty-one days. On the twenty-first day they brought you back up and went through the whole process again of interrogation.

T: Same guys?

S: Sometimes same guys, and sometimes different guys. As far as I could remember they were the same guys.

T: And just you being interrogated.

**(3, A, 164)**

S: Oh, yes.

T: And how many of them in the room?

S: There was about four or five.

T: Let's start with that twenty-one days in that little cell. What goes through your mind at a time like that?

S: I knew. I was already told, because the US Army intelligence, they have had prisoners that had escaped already and come back to the English side, and they knew more or less what this interrogation would be. And we were told exactly what was going to happen.

T: So you weren't surprised, per se.

S: No we weren't. We were told not to tell any lies. All you did was rank, name and serial number. That's all that was required of you, and your date of birth. Because once you start talking and you got into lies, then you were in trouble. So your best bet was rank, name and serial number and date of birth, and if that's all they could get out of you they couldn't say well, yesterday you told me this and you told me that. Contradict. So in order to be on the safe side, for your personal reasons, just rank, name and serial number because they told you if you start talking to the



Germans and tell them what you know, when you come back, the US Army will find out and you're subject to court-martial.

T: Because you've told them more than you're supposed to. How scared were you in a situation like this? Here you are facing three or four of these Germans over there.

S: We were pretty scared. By that time it wasn't life and death anymore, it was how much punishment you could take. Because some of us were, especially me, I was slapped around quite a bit. Because when they interrogated me they knew I was of Mexican descent, and they said I had no business fighting with the Americans because I was a Mexican.

T: They said that to you.

S: Oh, yes. I said no. I said I was born and raised in the US and I'm an American citizen and I'm an American. That's why I'm here. One of them said you're Mexican. You have no business fighting with the Americans. I said I am an American. You have to honor my uniform. But they still slapped me around quite a bit.

Anyhow, after the twenty-first day they came out with the same kind of interrogation that they did the first day. And after about five or six hours that they couldn't get nothing from me, they put me back in the dungeon again for another twenty-one days. It was probably more like nineteen or twenty days. It wasn't twenty-one days. After I got out of the dungeon they interrogated me again, but they didn't put me back into the dungeon. And by that time it was better than a month already from the time I got shot down until my last interrogation. By that time they put me in a room, and by that time there must have been about eighteen or twenty of us POWs...

T: Fliers all?

S: All fliers. In the same room in this castle. Then they told us that they were going to send us to a prison camp. But they didn't tell us where. The next day that whole bunch of us, they took us to a train station in Frankfurt, and wouldn't you know it, we were in that train station trying to be transported from there to Stalag XVII—we didn't know where we were going, but it happened to be Stalag XVII.

T: You were going to go by train?

S: By train. What they call forty and eight.

T: Little boxcars.

S: An air raid.

T: So American or British planes.

**(3, A, 221)**

S: Americans. At that time the Americans would fly during the day. The British would fly during the night. If it was the day we were pretty certain that they were Americans.

T: And it was during the day you said.

S: It was during the day. So an air raid. In the marshalling yard, because Frankfurt had, at that time it was the largest marshalling yard in the world.

T: Because it is a central location, isn't it, for rail?

S: Yes. Anyhow, they had a raid on the marshalling yards and bombs were falling all over. Here there were twenty or twenty-one, I don't remember how many exactly it was, around twenty of us that were being transported, and here like dang fools we were hollering at the Americans, oh, come on! Hit your target!

T: Of course that would have been you.

S: Yes. And all the Germans were running from one place to another, and they kept us secluded in one bunch. After the raid they cleared the tracks and started marching us by rail to Stalag XVII which was in Vienna.

T: That's in Krems which is far away. When those bombs were falling what do you think of? Are you scared because obviously the bombs could fall on you?

S: Yes.

T: What are you thinking about?

S: I don't know. It was like an exhilarating experience, because we knew that if they fall close enough we would be killed. But we knew that they were Americans out there, and we wanted to show the Germans that we were not afraid. So consequently... Now I think we were damn fools for doing that.

T: Because the more successful those planes were, the greater the chance that you were going to be hit.

S: I don't recall how many days, but it was two or three days from the time we went from Frankfurt, Germany to...

T: Frankfurt's up here on the Main River near... right about here (*pointing at map*). Yes, there's the Main River. So it's right about here. We're looking at a map right now of Germany, and Austria.

S: It's quite a ways over there.

T: It's quite a ways. It's several hundred miles.

S: Yes.

T: Now you were in a boxcar. Just one boxcar?

S: One boxcar.

T: Describe the conditions in that boxcar.

S: That was kind of unique too because, like I say, we didn't have hardly anything to eat. Just bread and water for the duration. Just enough to keep us alive.

T: In the boxcar as well?

S: We didn't have any hot food. It was two or three days. I don't recall how many days to go from Frankfurt to Krems, Austria. But our main destination though was from Frankfurt to Vienna.

T: On the train. Because Krems is a little town on the Danube there.

**(3, A, 260)**

S: About twenty miles or thirty miles, actually, from Krems to Vienna.

T: How about the other guys on the train with you? How did people handle the stress of being imprisoned and being in this boxcar?

S: We were all kind of scared. We joked about different things. But as I said before, we did not talk about where we came from, what outfit we were flying with, because that was taboo.

T: Everybody knew that, so nobody was trying to ask questions like that.

S: Yes. Because if I started asking you different questions about where you came from, then you would kind of get kind of suspicious. Because we knew you weren't supposed to do any talking.

T: Those were the questions the Germans had just been asking.

S: That's right. So we kind of mostly talked about ourselves and about baseball and just different things that happened, but nothing personal. Nothing that had anything to do with the Army. That was stress. When we were flying all the time... Because

we knew if we got killed, we wouldn't talk. But if you got captured, not to be talking about anything that had to do with any military value... *(trails off)*

T: Yes.

S: So we got to Vienna, and then they took us off the train and they marched us up and down the streets. Through the city. We were there a whole day. We got there early in the morning, and they marched us through all those streets and the children, and civilians, and the women and children would spit at us, throw rocks at us, throw sticks at us. They were brutal. There was nothing we could do, because we were unarmed and we had guards. If we tried to throw anything back to them we knew that we'd be killed, so we had no defense at all. So we were defenseless.

T: So they were intentionally marching you through the streets here.

S: Oh, yes.

T: To get abuse from the civilians.

S: Yes.

T: That sounds like a pretty awful experience.

S: It was. People don't know about freedom until something like that happens.

T: I think of being scared. In a sense, there's no one to protect you from these people either.

S: You have no civil rights whatsoever.

T: You were still with the same group of guys weren't you, that were on the train?

S: Yes.

T: And there were how many of them? About twenty?

S: Around twenty. All Americans. All fliers. And then they put us in trucks and they trucked us from Vienna to Krems, Austria, to the Stalag XVII. A funny thing happened when we got there. We were all starving. We hadn't had anything to eat since we got shot down.

T: You'd had bread and water in the cell you mentioned, but any food on the train?

S: Bread and water.

**(3, A, 298)**

T: Bread and water. So you're hungry.

S: So there was around five thousand prisoners of war by that time. Close to that in Krems, Austria. In Stalag XVII. They knew we were coming. They were on starvation diets themselves, you know. But they knew we were coming. There were quite a few days before that. How they knew, I don't quite understand.

T: The Americans knew you were coming.

S: Yes. The American POWs. So they themselves rationed themselves and they held some of their food to feed us.

T: So when you got there, there was something to eat.

S: Something for us to eat. So we said, oh, man, this is going to be nice. Here they have nice hot food. They sacrificed quite a bit to help us.

T: By the time you got there, which must have been May 1944, I imagine some of these guys had been there for a while.

S: Oh, yes. I think it was towards the end of May. I think it was around the end of May or the first of June. In that area.

T: That would be about five weeks since you were shot down.

S: Yes. When we first got there and they gave us food, why this is going to be nice, you know. We're going to be treated well. At least we're going to have something to eat. Never knowing that after we got there that they start giving us our daily rations and, where's the rest of the food coming from? That's all you get.

T: Talk about the food. What was the daily food ration there? What did you have to eat and how much of it?

S: In the morning you got a cup of hot water. That was it. Nothing else.

T: No teabag, no ersatz coffee, nothing.

S: Nothing. One hot cup of water. And around one o'clock or noon you got, it was like a broth and soup. It was mostly barley soup. I don't know. They must have had it in warehouses; [don't know how] long their barley had been stored in their warehouse. It was full of worms.

T: The soup was.

S: The barley. It was wormy. Sometimes long worms and sometimes... Anyhow, they didn't clean it. They just cooked the barley.

T: So the worms sometimes would show up in your soup?

S: Yes. Yes. At first when I looked at it, the first couple days, I wouldn't eat it. I'd say, worms like that. I ain't going to eat that stuff. I got hungry enough.

T: It's amazing what hunger will do. What about the cups, bowls and spoons? You didn't arrive with any of that stuff.

S: You made them. Every so often you'd get a Red Cross parcel that had tin cans and that. You cut the cans in strips and made a spoon or knife or a cup.

T: So you were on your own for this stuff. You had to have...

S: You made all your utensils out of the parcels that you got from the Red Cross. You didn't get any utensils to eat.

T: How about when you first arrived there? When you didn't have this stuff? Did somebody...

S: Some of their prisoners would loan you theirs to eat. Once we got there, the camaraderie in the camp, the guys would lay down their lives for you. They were just, I think they were closer than brothers.

### **(3, A, 340)**

T: How would you compare... Now, oftentimes you were with the 379<sup>th</sup> at first. Bomb Group. And you had a crew that you trained with and flew with, and you talked about how close that relationship is with a crew. How would you compare that relationship to the relationship that POWs had at Stalag XVII?

S: I think it was almost the same, if not stronger. You didn't know the guy next to you from Adam. You hadn't met him before in your life, and yet he'd do anything for you, or else you'd do anything for him.

T: So there was a sense of needing to depend on each other.

S: Yes.

T: Now food, this soup or broth, was it the same kind of soup every day pretty much?

S: Every day. Sometimes P-51s would come and strafe the fields, and in that part of Germany they had very few horses. They had mostly oxen. And they would strafe

the fields and kill an oxen or a horse. We would get meat then. It would be oxen meat or horse meat. There was very little, because it was rationed amongst the rest of it.

T: So meat was a rare occurrence.

S: Yes. In the summertime we'd get vegetables. Like rutabagas, potatoes. But in very small quantities.

T: Was bread part of your diet at the camp?

S: That bread there—the loaves (*holds hands about twelve inches apart*).

T: A little over a foot long?

S: Yes. About a foot in diameter, and they would raise probably about four inches. They would bring them in an oxcart. A little cart. They wouldn't put them in the kitchen. They'd come with an oxcart and just dump them on the ground.

T: Were the prisoners responsible for dividing up the bread?

S: Oh, yes. They had what they call a kitchen crew. Then they were responsible for dividing. Everybody would get an equal part.

T: Was the bread ration pretty much the same amount every day?

S: Oh, yes.

T: Describe that bread. Describe the feel and the taste of the bread as you remember it.

S: It [the bread] was hard to chew. It was hard to swallow. You had to get it moist with something to eat it. Another thing. After we were there and got partial rations, or even when the Germans would give us their barley soup, we'd get that bread and cut it into little crumbs and put it the barley soup and then boil it. That would give it more substance.

T: The bread, the whole soup and everything.

S: This way it was more of a filling your stomach because you had all that—I don't think there was any nutrition value in the bread.

T: But did it fill you up? Now you're not talking about a lot of food here. Were you hungry?

S: That's another thing. About hunger. A lot of people misconstrue hunger. Your body after say, two or three weeks, your metabolism and your body adjust to the intake and consequently you're not hungry until you start eating. To this day. My wife cooks and she says aren't you hungry? I say no. I'm not hungry at all. She says you have to eat something. I'd say, well, I'm not hungry. So she cooks something and once I start eating I start...

T: Then you're hungry?

S: Devour it. So she says, take it easy!

**End of Tape 3, Side A. Side B begins at counter 382.**

S: She cooks and she asks me what I'm hungry for. To be truthful I'm not hungry for anything. I don't feel hungry. I very seldom do. Until I start eating. Once I start eating, I'm hungry.

T: And that's something that you date back to the time in the camp?

S: I think so.

T: Was the amount of food you're being fed, was scrounging for food or talking about food, was that something that occupied people?

S: Talking about food, because we had very little food. But we had reading material. I don't know why but the Germans—we had a library. Anything you wanted to read on any topic that wasn't injuring to the German society, we could have.

T: So there were books available.

S: Books of any kind. And in English. About astronomy, about anything you wanted to read. Mathematics. They had reading material. Anything you wanted to read. And musical instruments. Anything you wanted to have.

T: So there were things to occupy your time.

S: But no food.

T: Let me ask about the daily routine, because activities are part of that. When did the day start and how did a typical day go at the camp?

S: Every morning around six o'clock in the morning we had a—Sergeant Schultz was his name, he was a real chunky guy. He'd used to come and say, "Appel, Appel. Raus! Raus! Raus!" We had a barracks divided into two sections. The front section held eighty bedrooms and the second section another eighty. And in between was a



little washroom, like wash cloth where we—no soap or anything, just water where we could wash.

T: But there was turn on water.

S: Right. We had plenty of water to wash and drink. I can't recall how wide it is. On each side of your bed they had bunks in three tiers. The bunks consisted of burlap bags filled with straw.

T: These were pretty big buildings. You had eighty in the front and eighty in the back and then this middle section. So this was a pretty [big] building.

S: And there was a wooden structure with wood boards nailed, but on any wooden structure you can see that there's no insulation or anything, so you can see through cracks.

T: Right outside. So it was just a very simple wood structure.

S: And it had window cuttings where glass should be but no glass.

T: Just open.

S: Open, and at night they had shutters that would shut. But in the day you'd open them up.

T: So in the summer this sounds okay, but in the winter...

S: Cold. Because it used to get twenty, twenty-five below zero in the wintertime.

T: So you were cold in there.

S: They said it never got that cold in Germany. The hell it didn't! You go up in those Bavarian Mountains, it gets down to forty below sometimes.

T: So in this barracks you had your own bunk, burlap filled with straw. And at six o'clock in the morning typically there would be some kind of Appel.

S: Appel, and then you'd get up and they'd give you five minutes. [Then] they'd march you outside for roll call. It all depends on how the Germans felt on that roll call. Sometimes it would be fifteen minutes. Sometimes ten minutes. Sometimes all day. You'd stand out...

T: Really? So they would... And were you counted there?

S: Oh, yes. Name and count. Name, and you had a number.

T: A prison number.

S: Yes.

T: That you were given by the Germans.

S: Yes. And it depended on the mood or how the day was going for the major. Sometimes you'd get roll call and you could come back in the barracks and wait for your breakfast, for your hot water. Then sometimes they'd start asking questions and if you didn't give them the right answer they'd stay all day. There were days we had to stay, on a real cold day, was many, many a day that we had to stay at attention for eight hours outside.

T: All the barracks were empty. There you were standing.

S: Everybody. The idea of doing that—punishment I guess. Because a lot of times they were looking for contraband that we had. Radios, and we had tunnels. We knew for a fact that the Germans had their own spies. They had their own people acting as prisoners of war.

T: Among the real prisoners.

S: That's right.

T: As you mention that, there's a film made in the 1950s called *Stalag 17*. And it shows some of what you're describing, including a prisoner. He was a fake prisoner, because he was actually a German spy, and from your recollection, this [is] actually something that you were worried about.

S: Oh, yes. We knew there was. And also, I found [out] after I got out. About two years after I got out. It must have been longer than that because I went to a prisoner of war convention in Colorado. I met a friend of mine that I knew as a prisoner of war, and I found out that he was Secret Service.

T: American Secret Service.

S: Then he returned all the possessions that the Germans took away from me. All the personal possessions that the Germans took away from me. He returned them back to me here in Minnesota.

T: How did he have them?

S: Through the Secret Service.

T: So they got hold of the American stuff, and so things that you had taken away from you were returned?

S: They were returned. They returned everything except my high school class ring.

T: So you got back your wallet.

S: My watch, my wallet. Everything was in it. Except my high school graduation ring.

T: No kidding. You got that stuff back later.

S: Yes.

T: So you never were quite sure who to trust and who not to trust in the camp.

**(3, B, 507)**

S: That's right.

T: Did you find anybody in the camp that you knew, had known beforehand?

S: No. The only one that I knew was my tail gunner.

T: The guy from this crew that you were shot down?

S: The only one that I knew. Other than that I didn't know a soul that I had known beforehand.

T: This tail gunner, is he the only other member of the crew to have survived?

S: That's right.

T: Did you talk to him at all about being on that mission?

S: When he and I were together in one corner, when nobody was around we used to talk about what things happened. How come this thing happened and that thing happened (*heavy sigh*). I used to cuss at him all the time. Because they weren't firing anymore. I used to tell him, the reason I am alive today is because I ran out of ammunition, and for the life of me I couldn't hear anybody firing their guns. We were under attack for almost four hours when we were shot down. I always used to carry extra ammunition in the belly. So in order to get my ammunition I had to roll myself back in the belly and reload.

T: Right. And that's the thing that saved your life as it turned out. What did you talk about with him about that mission? Because you only knew him on that mission, didn't you?

S: I used to ask him where they got their training and what kind—he was the one that told me that that was their very first mission. They had never flown before. So I told him if I had known that, I wouldn't...

T: You didn't know that before, did you?

S: Yes. Because I said, here we were in one of our deepest missions. Because in the morning before we take off we'd get up about three thirty in the morning. Shower and shave and then get ready. We'd go to church and then breakfast. A lot of things we had to do at a certain time before we took off. Then I'd have to go in the plane and inspect the plane. Then I would have to go [to] like an interrogation, a briefing.

T: Before.

S: Before. We'd go into the briefing room. They had theater, a great big curtain...

T: It would be closed.

S: It would be closed. Because in back of that curtain was a map of all the targets that were in Germany. As long as that curtain was closed, you could get up and say well, I'm sick. I can't take it. I'm not going to fly today.

T: As long as the curtain was closed.

S: As long as the curtain was closed. When they started opening that curtain, they'd have guards on the doors, on all the exits. They'd close the doors and the guard on the outside. Nobody in and out. Once that curtain started going up...

T: Then you were flying.

S: You were flying.

T: I didn't know that. So the curtain's open, and you saw the mission...

S: You had a string from where you were, had a string. As the curtain went around, you had on and on and on, and pretty soon the string would end at the target you were hitting that day. So it was Schweinfurt.

**(3, B, 559)**

T: That was infamous, in a sense.

S: One of the longest.

T: And most heavily defended places as it turned out. So you'd become, what would you say, friends with this guy? Or just somebody that...

S: We became pretty friendly. In fact, I got pretty friendly with a lot of [the other POWs] once you got to know them. You got real friendly. They would tell you where they came from, what city they were from. All the personal—nothing to do with the service. You could do that. You could talk to one another. As long as it did not pertain to your service, you were all right. So I became friends with a lot of...

In fact, one winter I got a real bad case of pneumonia and I was dying, and two friends of mine... I think the reason I'm alive today is because they got together. We had very little quilts to keep warm. One guy slept on one side of me, on each side of me and bumped together to keep me warm.

T: That really is a close friendship then. You were forced to depend on each other.

S: Oh, yes.

T: Did you really operate as a group of friends, sort of looking for each other as far as food and...

S: Um hum. And also by doing that, you cut the night on different things that had to be on the up and up. We had what they call a security—we formed a security council of people we kind of trusted, each other. Each barracks had a security council. We all looked at different things. Kept an eye on things to see that everything was on the up and up.

T: Like what for example? What were you looking for?

S: We were looking for guys talking to the Germans, talking to the guards, especially some of the guys that we didn't trust.

T: Talk about the Germans. What kind of people were they and what did you think of them?

S: In our case we were all Air Force. In Stalag XVII we were all Air Force. They rotated the guards.

T: So you didn't see the same ones all the time.

S: One month there was the Luftwaffe which was fliers. The next month was SS, some of them. The next time was the regular People's Army.

T: So the guards rotated. No one stayed there all too long.

S: All except the commander, and they had section sergeants. Like Sergeant Schultz [character in 1960s TV show, *Hogan's Heroes*] that used to wake us up every morning. He was there all the time.

T: There was almost like a skeleton crew of people who were there all the time and then different teams of guards would be rotated in and out.

S: Yes. And then they had guard towers every so often. In between they had about an eight foot section where they had roaming guards that would walk around the perimeter. Then on this side they had a barbed wire fence and then next to the barbed wire fence they had an electrical fence. So there was about four sets of fence before you could go out.

T: It suggests that the Germans were worried about people trying to escape. Did you know of any kind of, did people talk about escaping? Or were there escape attempts?

S: There were quite a few. There were, but I thought it was kind of futile because we were so far—in our case we had to go over the Alps.

**(3, B, 614)**

T: So even if you get out, what do you do anyway?

S: Yes. In the summertime it was possible. But in the wintertime it was almost impossible because you would freeze to death. So you had to have a lot of outside help and I found out later that there were like guerilla fighters from different European nations that would kind of... Because a lot of places were wooded areas. All around our camp. Sometimes they'd come in and throw parcels of stuff over the fence at night when the guards wouldn't see them. The different guys that knew what was coming. So we knew we had outside help and every airplane had a radioman. So that radioman, he could out of pieces of wire and pieces of crystal he could make a receiver. So we had receivers all over the place.

T: So you were aware of news or developments...

S: We could receive, but we couldn't send.

T: But you could hear.

S: Yes.

T: How much aware of things were you, as just an average prisoner, of news?

S: We had a system. In fact I found out later, and he's a very good friend of mine. His name is Ray Elias, from White Bear Lake. Ray Elias. He was superintendent of sandpaper division for Minnesota Mining. But before he got captured he was working for the division at a lower rank. But later on in civilian life he became superintendent of that division.

T: You didn't know him before you were in camp.

S: No. And he was a radioman, and every day in the morning he used to come and give us news that he had received.

T: So he had somehow constructed a little radio receiver.

S: A receiver. At the time I knew him he was thinner than you are, and he's tall. But now he's a big chunky man. He retired a long time ago. He's still alive.

T: He still lives in White Bear Lake?

S: I think so. Because he's a member of ex-POWs.

T: Now these Germans, so the guards you saw on a daily basis changed from time to time. How were the prisoners, including yourself, treated by the German guards?

S: It all depends what particular guard unit was guarding. Out of five thousand fliers that were in Stalag XVII, there were only five of Mexican descent.

T: Did you know the other five, or did you sort of find each other because you were Mexicans?

S: Kind of. They kind of look at you and start talking to you and find out what section of the country you were from. Diego was from New Mexico and he was a funny guy. I used to kid him, his last name was Lexington. I said, "A Mexican, where did you get a name like Lexington?" That was his name. And there was one from Colorado. At the time I was from Minnesota. And one from the state of Washington.

T: So really from all over.

S: Yes.

T: Could you speak Spanish with each other?

S: Oh, yes, [we spoke Spanish with each other].

T: So there was a natural bond because you were Mexican?

S: And we were treated different by the guards. Not by our fliers, because we were all one family. No matter who or what color I was, I was part of the family.

T: How did the Germans treat you differently as a Mexican?

**(3, B, 663)**

S: They [the Germans] would try to come by and they would see you and they had this gun that hit you by the kidneys with the butt of the rifle or in the neck. And then they would start asking you a lot of questions and then if you give them some smart answer you'd go in solitary confinement for a week.

T: Really?

S: Oh, yes.

T: So is it safe to say you felt they were picking on you in a way?

S: I think they were [picking on me, in a way]. Because out of that whole five thousand, I think us Mexicans were in solitary confinement longer than anybody else.

T: You were there in solitary confinement yourself at this camp?

S: Oh, yes. I was there quite a few times.

T: For doing what?

S: For speaking back to the Germans.

T: So they would say something to you in English or German or...

S: Both German and English.

T: And if you answered them back in a tone they didn't like...

S: And then too a lot of us would try to trade—see, I wasn't a smoker. For some reason or other the German guards loved American cigarettes.

T: Which would come in the Red Cross packages.

S: In the Red Cross packages. I don't recall how many packets of cigarettes were in the Red Cross parcel, but every time we'd get a Red Cross parcel, I'd get about fifteen cigarettes. So I tried to get a hold of a German that I thought was more in a trading mood, and we kind of looked around and find out what you can deal with and what you cannot, and I'd trade my cigarettes for German bread. Real bread. I knew this one German guard that was from Vienna, and his wife used to make strudel.

T: And he'd [trade] some of this sometimes.



S: Yes. I'd see him eat strudel and be smoking. He'd be eating strudel and singing. Cigarette for strudel. At first he'd give me a piece of strudel for one cigarette. And after a while I said, no, you give me a whole strudel for one cigarette.

T: So there was bartering.

S: Yes.

T: Did other prisoners...

S: I think most of us did that.

T: Was it okay in prisoner's eyes for other prisoners to be dealing with the Germans like that?

S: No. But as long as they knew that you weren't speaking any secrets or anything, and that you were wanting something like eating something, it was all right. But, like cigarettes were even precious amongst our people. Because if you smoked... I thought, you guys are crazier than hell. You would rather starve to death than trade one of your cigarettes for a piece of bread. He said I'd rather starve to death than...

T: Rather smoke than eat?

S: Yes. A lot of them would do that.

**(3, B, 698)**

T: So Americans would trade their cigarettes. If you were a smoker you'd want cigarettes. You would trade food to get them.

S: Yes.

T: If you weren't a smoker like you, the other way around.

S: Yes.

T: How often did these Red Cross packages arrive, do you recall?

S: We were supposed to get one every fifteen days. At first one every week and then they said every fifteen days. And then one every month. But as far as that goes, I think it was over a month before each individual...

T: So they weren't coming very often.

S: No. And in the Red Cross [package] there was a little packet of cheese, American cheese, a packet of cigarettes. They had a little of Oleo margarine. A couple of little boxes of raisins. Let me see. What else? A few different items. A bar of soap.

T: Coffee or chocolate?

S: Coffee and chocolate.

T: And cigarettes you mentioned too.

S: Yes.

T: Now these are some valuable things you're mentioning. To prisoners. Was there a problem among prisoners of stealing from each other?

S: No. Not that I can recall. Maybe there were, but they were pretty honest about each other. Also every once in a while a carton of playing cards.

T: Playing cards. So something to do.

S: Yes. Bicycle or Beatty or... And it happened that the Germans never did find out. There [were] playing cards and you could put heat or vapor on them and split that card and by having that whole packet they had a map, a European map. You could find a European map.

T: From the information that was printed literally inside these cards.

S: Yes. And POW organizations, they had those cards.

T: So they really did exist.

S: Oh, yes.

T: Now some of the cards, I guess you could actually play with them too.

S: Oh, yes.

T: Now you mentioned cards. Earlier you mentioned books and musical instruments, suggesting there were actually things to do.

S: Oh, yes.

T: Because you had plenty of time on your hands.

S: Some of those people—they had pretty well educated people in the prison camp. We had educational sessions.

T: On different subjects?

S: On different subjects. And we had theatrical plays put on by the prisoners of war and we had musical sessions. They had musical instruments...

T: Because some guys knew how to play these instruments, didn't they?

S: Yes.

T: How did you pass your time? There were a lot of options. What did you do?

S: I did a lot of playing cards and chess and that. I played a lot of chess and a lot of card games.

**(3, B, 734)**

T: Were the card games, was there betting going on in those card games for money or cigarettes or...

S: We didn't have any money. We had cigarettes.

T: Cigarettes. That was what people would play for?

S: Yes.

T: I'm thinking of valuable things on card games. Did those card games get pretty heated sometimes?

S: Oh, yes [those card games got pretty heated sometimes]. [We had bridge tournaments.] Myself and my tail gunner, we cheated because...

T: It's fifty years later. You can admit it now *(both laugh)*.

S: He and I had different signals. In fact we became B-XVII bridge champions in the camp. We had bridge tournaments.

T: How do you cheat at contract bridge?

S: To let him know what I had, or he would let me know what he had, by different mannerisms or saying different things. We had different signals for different things. I suppose some of the other guys did too, but they didn't... *(trails off)*

T: They weren't as good at it as you.

S: He and I became bridge champions. He became a claims manager for the POW organization. Judge advocate. For POWs. His name was Hubert Davis. We had a meeting one time in White Bear, and for the whole state of Minnesota we have cookouts, and we were there and they were running for different national offices and him being a judge advocate, he came to our cookout. I didn't recognize him from Adam because at the time I knew him he was a skinny tall kid. He was talking about having this little Mexican boy as a partner. Called him Smoky. I looked at him. I said, "Go to hell, God damn it. You're not Huey!" He says, "Who in the hell are you?" I said, "I'm Smoky."

T: He didn't recognize you either?

S: No.

**End of Tape 3. Tape 4, Side A begins at counter 000.**

T: So there were activities. There was card playing. You mentioned chess. Musical instruments. Was there enough to keep you occupied during the day?

S: There was boxing, too.

T: Boxing too? So people had enough energy to box?

S: Yes. I never boxed because I'm not going to get all beat up.

T: You're a smart guy.

S: We had volleyball.

T: So this summer when the weather was nice, summer and fall of 1944, you were there, it sounds like the conditions were still good enough that guys could do physical activities. The Germans give you things to do. It sounds like the treatment you're describing is not necessarily bad from the Germans.

S: We tried to do physical exercise so we would be physically—I mean, you couldn't over exercise because there wasn't enough energy. But we tried to do enough physical exercises. We didn't have any medical equipment.

T: What if you got sick? Was there...

S: Too bad. That was it. You're done.

T: There was no medical help at all.

S: Not that I can recall. Because like I say, that one time I got pneumonia, the reason I'm alive today is because these friends of mine kept me warm during the night.

T: Did people die? Did prisoners die in the camp?

S: I don't know. They claim there was a couple of them that died and there were four that I know got shot trying to escape.

T: Really? So that was something that happened while you were there.

S: Right.

T: Were they shot after trying to escape or while they were trying to escape.

S: While they were trying to escape. I don't know how or why they had these rulings. If you were trying to escape, if you were caught during the act of trying to escape, you were shot. But once you got over the last wall...

T: Fence or...

S: Over the last fence they would bring you back and put you in solitary confinement for twenty-one days and that was it.

T: So there were different treatments during the act of...

S: You'd get shot. No questions asked. We knew that.

T: What happened to these guys when they tried to escape? Is that something you heard about later or something you...

S: No. They had escape routines and different people trying to teach knowledge of how. We had security. Like anybody else. Because we were taught before we were shot down to form security. We were taught that the senior noncom and the senior officer that was shot down was the head of the compound.

T: So there was as specific order established by the Americans in case something like this happened. So you knew what to expect when you got there.

S: So the senior noncom in our barracks, he was head of the whole barracks. He was the lead honcho. He had authority to give orders.

T: When you think about your camp experience, what was the most difficult thing for you?

S: Food rations I think was the most. And not getting any information from home.

T: Did you get mail, or could you correspond at all?

**(4, A, 69)**

S: I think that you were allowed two letters a month, but there was very, very little correspondence. Some guys got some, but very little from back home. I never got any mail either way. I never wrote any, and I never got any.

T: Did your family back here, did they know you were missing in action or were a POW?

S: They knew I was missing in action the day I was shot down. They didn't know I was alive until six months later.

T: So there was a period of time where they didn't know anything.

S: Yes.

T: That must have been hard on them. So for you the food, the lack of food, was the most difficult thing.

S: Yes.

T: You made it through a winter there as well. The winter of 1944-45. Did cold weather make camp life any more difficult?

S: I think so because weather has a lot to do—especially when you don't have the clothing to... Every so often the International Red Cross would come for inspection.

T: So they would come to the camp.

S: Yes. We knew when they were coming, because the day before the Red Cross officials came for inspection, they would issue us blankets.

T: Really? So that when the Red Cross came they would see the blankets.

S: We all had nice warm blankets. The minute the Red Cross official left, they took all those blankets away.

T: So you only had them for a day?

S: Yes. That's all.

T: So it was all kind of a phony picture that they were getting. Could you talk to these Red Cross people or not?

S: They designated leaders, barracks leaders supposedly [could talk to them], but I don't know. They claimed that they told them about our conditions in camp, but I don't know whether they believed them or not because it never did improve.

T: These inspections, what purpose you're not sure.

S: Yes.

T: Did you see them regularly or just... The Red Cross people?

S: No. They were supposed to be there once a month, but all the time I was there I only saw them twice.

T: So late in the war they weren't coming that regularly. What difference did the cold weather make as far as camp life from your perspective?

S: Miserable. Cold weather... When you're cold it's miserable. The front barracks had a stove in the front and a stove in the back. But we didn't have anything to put in it.

T: So it was cold in those barracks?

S: It was cold. So consequently the barracks—they had rafters you know, and attics. Consequently, I think a hard wind would come [and blow the building down] because we tore all the rafters from in between—all the wood we left was supporting rafters that would support the roof. We burned everything else.

**(4, A, 122)**

T: So you took what wood you could from inside. They weren't giving you any fuel for the stoves.

S: Very little. We had, in the Red Cross parcels we had Oleo margarine. The Germans wouldn't want it, but we used it for fuel. We used to burn it.

T: The Germans didn't want that. Did they look through the packages do you think? Did the Germans go through the Red Cross packages before you got them?

S: No. They opened them and everything that had cans they'd punch a hole in it.

T: So you had to open it and get rid of it.

S: Get rid of it. Right.

T: One final thing about camp. You mentioned solitary confinement. What did you get sent to solitary confinement for?

S: For talking back to the Germans or not doing what they ordered me to do fast enough. I'd take my time about doing it.

T: Like a work detail or something?

S: Yes. But we never went on the work details outside of the camp.

T: Your entire time at Stalag XVII was inside the camp.

S: Yes. They honored the Geneva Convention, because according to the Geneva Convention if you were a sergeant or better they weren't supposed to work you.

T: And you were a sergeant or better weren't you?

S: Yes.

T: So you didn't have PFCs or things in this camp, did you?

S: No. We were all sergeants or better.

T: Noncommissioned. So there were three levels of camps. There were lowest ranking enlisted, noncommissioned officers, and then officers.

S: Yes.

T: So this camp...

S: We were all noncommissioned officers. We didn't have any officers in the camp. Just noncommissioned officers.

T: It sounds like the treatment you got may have been a little better than the lowest level of just PFCs and what have you.

S: So I figured if I had been a PFC where I could go out in the field and work, I could steal or take or eat some of the vegetables that I was working on, but being in camp all the time... We weren't allowed to be outside of the camp.

T: Some of the work details may not have been all that pleasant either.

S: Yes.

T: But you may have had a chance for food. Solitary confinement. The Germans could simply say, if you're not working fast enough or you're smarting off, they could put you in...



S: Oh, yes. Their word was law.

T: Describe the solitary confinement cells. There were cells, were they?

S: There were cells, just like in a regular prison. Four by six. Be there a week or two. Get bread and water. They had French trustees.

T: French trustees?

S: POWs. But they were trustees. And there were some French. They were worse than the Germans.

**(4, A, 163)**

T: The French trustees?

S: Yes.

T: Talk about that. Why? In what way?

S: There were two things. For one thing they would tell on you. They'd eat most of your bread. If you get a slice of bread, they take most of it.

T: So they'd be responsible for giving you your food ration and they'd take some for themselves.

S: Yes.

T: In the cell could you do anything, or just sit there?

S: There was nothing you could do [in the cell].

T: Was it any warmer or nicer than your cell? Was it a place that you didn't mind going or was it pretty crowded?

S: It was about the same. It was about the same as the facilities inside as outside.

T: So you weren't maltreated in this little cell but it was the place you had to go spend a week for something.

S: All by yourself.

T: What do you think about when you're all by yourself in there, Simon?

S: Just meditate. Just dreaming, and think about things on the outside. I had a friend of mine. He was of Eastern Indian descent and he used to practice a lot of yoga. I

used to be in pain all the time because of all my broken bones and that. Him and I would go on yoga. He would teach me yoga because he said that was Eastern Indian philosophy. And think about it. He says your mind is one of the most precious things that you can have. He says but you can only think of one subject at a time.

T: You met this guy in the camp, did you?

S: He was a flier like I was. He says when you're feeling pain you meditate and think of any subject that you want. Think of [being] next to a water stream and you can hear that water falling and you'll forget all about your pains. Think about something pleasant and you forget about your pain.

T: And did this meditation serve you well when you were in camp?

S: I thought it did.

T: Particularly when you're alone I suppose. I want to move forward here because by early 1945 the war for the Germans was going badly. They were being pushed back on the eastern front and on the western front. How much news did you have as prisoners of how the war was going?

S: We knew what was going on every week.

T: So you knew the Germans were in tough shape.

S: Because we had receivers. Each plane had a radioman.

T: So you were aware. Now how...

S: Even like the Battle of the Bulge. We knew [how] everything was going, daily.

T: By early 1945 did conversations begin to turn to the end of the war?

S: [Yes].

T: As conversations were held about the end of the war, how did you see yourselves? Was there talk about what's going to happen to us?

**(4, A, 212)**

S: Yes. The reason we knew the war was going a lot better, because every day less and less fliers were being shot down.

T: So there were fewer people coming into the camp.

S: Yes.

T: That's a way of showing that there's fewer being shot down.

S: That's right. Because by D-Day there was hardly anybody being shot down. Before D-Day, that's one of the reasons they needed D-Day because the Allies wanted to get rid of the Air Force because if the Germans would have had their Air Force in full swing we would never have been successful in D-Day.

T: So fewer people were being shot down. As conversations were held about the end of the war, were people worried about what was going to happen to you?

S: We were kind of worried. What's going to happen to us? I found out now—I don't know whether it's hearsay—from pretty good authority, that on that last march we were being marched to a concentration camp like they had for the Jews that were being put in those ovens. You can see from Braunau, where we were released, we were close to one of those oven deals. We were being marched.

T: I know from your own account that you were marched for some forty-seven or forty-eight days.

S: Something like that.

T: Which means it was sometime in March 1945. Was the camp empty?

S: Empty. Everybody. Everybody was gone.

T: How much ahead of time did you know that the camp was going to be emptied?

S: About two days.

T: So the Germans told you pack your stuff?

S: Yes. Only things that you can carry. A blanket and that's it. You're going to march for a long time, so don't take anything that's cumbersome or heavy because if you're sick you have to march.

T: What was going through your mind when this was announced? You're going to be evacuated and marched wherever.

S: We didn't know exactly what was going to go so we figured, we talk to each other and we said, we'd just have to help each other on this march. And it was true because I had real bad frozen feet by that time. A lot of times I could barely walk. A couple of good friends of mine, half of the time they carried me.

T: Did your feet, the frozen feet, was from that winter of [19]44-45 in the camp?

S: And from high flying because we were flying from eighteen to twenty-four thousand feet. Every day that you fly, you fly eight to twelve hours. Twenty-four to sixty-five below zero. No matter how good a boots you have your feet would be cold.

**(4, A, 255)**

T: Yes. When you were flying did you have those heated suits.

S: We had bunny suits. Yes.

T: Did that have something for your feet too or not? Were your feet kept warm?

S: You wore silk socks and I wore three pair of socks. I wore a silk sock, a cotton sock and wool sock. And then your boots.

T: And you still were cold.

S: Oh, yes. In layers.

T: So you had all these socks and shoes when you landed and so the whole time you were there I guess you had these socks and shoes.

S: [Yes].

T: But still your feet were in bad shape.

S: Yes.

T: So you had some days to prepare yourself, to gather—you didn't have much anyway.

S: We didn't have anything to go.

T: And in a sense did you just sort of line up and march out?

S: Yes.

T: How did you deal with that?

S: The funny part of it was it was just like my bivouac because we marched all day and when it come dusk that's where you camp for the night. In the open air. In open fields.

T: Anywhere you stopped. Just where you stopped?

S: Build a bonfire for the guards. Then find a place in the field to lay down and sleep.

T: Were all the prisoners from the camp kept in one group or were you split up?

S: We were lined up.

T: So several thousand of you just marching...

S: In groups but in line.

T: And during the day you'd march through little towns or villages or...

S: Towns. Yes. And we were sunburned. Some villages they had a central water fountain. Then we would be thirsty and when you try to drink their water the mayor, the guards they wouldn't let you drink the water. The very last little town that we went to, I think it was close to Mins, Austria. We came to it and they wouldn't let us drink out of that water fountain. The mayor came and said it was his water. They didn't want any what they called "Kriegsgefangen," they didn't want us prisoners of war to contaminate his water. He wouldn't let us drink his water.

T: You mentioned when you went through Vienna there was abuse by some civilians.

S: By civilians.

T: Were you abused on this march at all?

S: Oh, yes. The same thing. What I can't figure out, after the war all the German people claim they didn't know what was going on at the time and they liked the Americans, and I think that's a bunch of crap because every little town that I ever went to they were terrible.

T: The treatment.

S: The treatment.

T: They changed after the war though, didn't they?

**(4, A, 292)**

S: Funny thing happened. We were marching one day. Close to the river because the roads would always be close to a river. Why, I don't know. This one whole area had rock by the side of the road, rock formations. Outcrop. On the outcrop there were snails. Great big snails. And one guy from New Jersey was walking by and he nudged me and he said "Simon, look at those snails. Put them in your pocket. Pick up as many as you can and fill your pockets with those snails." (\*\*\*) He said, "Put

as many as you can in your pocket and tell all the guys around you to do the same thing. Tonight we're going to have a feast." I said, "What?" He says, "We're going to eat them." I said okay. So that night we boiled them...

T: You boiled them in the shell?

S: Yes.

T: And did they eat the snails?

S: Eat, eat, eat.

T: How was that, Simon?

S: Tasted good.

T: When you're hungry. When you were marching, did you sort of stick with a small group of people? Were there people that you marched with every day?

S: Yes. And during that march, I bet you ninety-five percent of us had dysentery. It was terrible.

T: When you have to... you go a lot when you have dysentery.

S: Yes.

T: Did you just stop at the side of the road?

S: That's all.

T: The people you marched with. How well did you get to know those people?

S: Very well because we all slept like one big happy family. We all helped each other. The slower guys go to the front because we didn't want somebody going fast. We kept those marches as slow a pace as we could possibly have.

T: So the slowest in the front and the fastest in the back. Because you can only go as fast as the slow person goes.

S: Yes.

T: Were you scrounging for food while you were on the way?

S: Yes. Anything that was live, was edible that we could see we could steal.

T: You mentioned the snails. What about through the cities and towns? Were there opportunities to get any kind of edible things?

S: Very little. A lot of times toward the evening before we would stop we would look for warehouses that we could see. We could sneak, at night when—because by that time we had very few guards.

T: I was going to ask you about the Germans. Did the camp guards go with you?

S: Yes.

T: So you saw them as well.

S: Yes.

T: How closely were they watching you as you were marching?

S: Not very close I don't think, because some of us—we didn't try to escape because we knew by then that the American forces were right close by. But at night we would, a bunch would escape and try to scrounge something to eat. We'd find a warehouse that had edibles so we could steal them and bring them back.

T: Can you think of an example where you did find something?

**(4, A, 329)**

S: The last week. The last three days we were almost dead from the march. We went through a little place there in Braunau and about five miles from where we last stopped we saw a bunch of warehouses. And so we stopped in this great big forest area. Austria has an awful lot of forest areas. We stopped in this forest area for our rest for two or three days. So some of us who had seen those warehouses and we went back...

T: You walked back yourself?

S: Yes. Even though we had been marching all day. Some of the guys were of German descent. They could read and write, and some of us learned German from...

T: You've used a couple German words already that stuck with you I suppose.

S: We went, and for some reason or other these warehouses weren't guarded. And this great big warehouse and it was full of German made pudding.

T: Pudding.

S: Boxes, like American boxes. Different flavors of pudding. Put water and boil them.

T: So you could recognize what that was.

S: Yes. So as many boxes as we could carry. So we distributed them among the group. Had a bunch of guys and we told them where it was. We stole a lot of pudding from these warehouses. So we filled our bellies with pudding. Really tasted good.

T: The way you talk, everything tasted good because you didn't have much of it.

S: So we had these boxes of pudding and we built bonfires because we were in this forest area. We had big boxes of pudding [and] we had leftovers we were going to use the next day. We woke up the next morning and the boxes of pudding were gone.

T: What happened to them?

S: Next to us was a big concentration of Russian POWs also.

T: They were marching with you?

S: Along side of us but separated from us. So we got our pudding back, but we had to fight for it.

T: With the Russians.

S: Yes.

T: They had come to your camp and taken it.

S: How they found out we had pudding... Anyhow, we got our pudding back. But then about the third day before we got liberated, General Patton was advancing—because we were right next to a river also. But he was on the opposite side of the river.

T: It was the Inn River I think.

S: He noticed there was a large concentration of movement on our side of the river and he thought that we were German soldiers on our side. So he was ready to bombard us, to shell us from his tanks across the river.

T: Because they couldn't tell...

S: Who we were.



**(4, A, 364)**

T: Let me ask about Americans, because other POWs that we've talked to [said] that you could see American aircraft sometimes.

S: Yes.

T: Did you ever see American aircraft?

S: Yes.

T: What were they doing?

S: Reconnaissance.

T: How about when you were marching? Did you ever see American planes while you were marching?

S: We saw a couple. But we didn't know exactly—we kind of thought that they were reconnaissance because they didn't fire at us.

T: Your column was never strafed by American planes.

S: No.

T: So maybe they knew where you were, maybe not.

S: Before they started bombarding us from the other side of the river, some of the reconnaissance told General Patton they thought there's a bunch of POWs in that area. So at night he sent reconnaissance troops to go over and find out what was going on on our side. So they found out that we were POWs [and] they went back and told the general that we were POWs. So during the night they built a bridge on the water and moved the tanks across the river.

**End of Tape 4, Side A. Side B begins at counter 377.**

T: Let me ask, because the third of May means you were marching for six weeks, seven weeks.

S: About forty-six or forty-seven days. In that area. Not quite two months.

T: How did the Germans feed you every day?

S: They didn't. What we could scrounge. They didn't bring any food.

T: When you stopped for the day there was no soup anymore, no bread anymore. Just what you could find.

S: Just hot water and what we could scrounge.

T: Were you always successful in scrounging?

S: Oh, yes. When you're hungry enough you can do a lot of things.

T: You also mentioned depending on other people to sort of be on the lookout for stuff. It sounds like if you were a loner at that time or trying to do it on your own you would have had a tough time.

S: Especially in the shape that we were in. At that time, being a prisoner of war for such a long time and being as weak as we were, you'd die if we didn't have help from anybody else. History talks about the Bataan March. I don't take anything away from them, but being a soldier all this time, I know for a fact that being an American soldier, you're fed three meals a day, three good meals a day and you're always fed. So the day you're captured you're in physical shape. So on that march you're in physical shape for it even though you're marching, you're in a heck of a lot better physical shape than we were.

T: Because you had been a POW for months, or years in some cases.

S: Some of those guys had been three years.

T: The conditions sound tough and the march sounds difficult. Did some guys not make it?

**(4, B, 415)**

S: Oh, yes.

T: What happened to guys who couldn't march, or got too sick, or whatever?

S: They died. They just buried them. They didn't kill them. They just died of natural causes.

T: Or from neglect it sounds like.

S: Um hum.

T: As you look at the people around you, did you notice people dying or not making it anymore?

S: A couple of them that I knew that didn't make it.

T: You were all noncoms. You had no officers, right?

S: All noncommissioned officers.

T: So you didn't have any chaplains with you, did you?

S: Yes.

T: You had chaplains with you too?

S: Yes. I don't remember who he was, but I knew we had a chaplain. I don't whether he was an ordained chaplain, but he knew his Bible and that. That's another thing. We had reading material.

T: This is at the camp now, right?

S: At the camp. I'm a Catholic, but I didn't know my Bible as well as I do now.

T: Were there Bibles for study at the library?

S: You could pick up any book you wanted.

T: Were there church services at your camp?

S: Oh, yes.

T: Talk about those.

S: We had all denominations. Catholic, Protestant, Jewish.

T: Did you have regular services?

S: Every Sunday.

T: And you could go if you wanted, or not go?

S: We had our little hall that we could use. We weren't forced to go, but you were encouraged to go to services every Sunday.

T: How often did you go, Simon?

S: [I went] every week.

T: Every week? What kind of message do you remember getting at a POW camp service?

S: [The message] was survival. Not to give up, and always think you were going to come back.

T: Did you believe that?

S: Oh, yes.

T: Did you believe you were going to make it back? How important was that? This idea that you were going, this is optimism that you were going to make it.

**(4, B, 455)**

S: I think it [optimism] was very important, because I know a lot of people that they didn't die of starvation and that, but mentally they gave up.

T: And if you mentally gave up, how bad was that? Was that the wrong thing to do for a prisoner?

S: Yes. A guy, I think he was from Tennessee. He was, his name was Kuhlencamp. He was a sergeant. Kuhlencamp. Tall skinny guy. And he had a leg wound. It never healed up. I knew him for over a year. His leg wound never healed up. It never got gangrene or anything in it, but it never got healed up and he used to walk with a bad limp all the time. He had been a POW for a year. He hadn't seen wife for almost three years.

T: Had he been stationed overseas?

S: Yes. And he got a letter one time that he was a father. That his wife just had a baby, and he was a father. He used to walk through the barracks up and down.

T: He wasn't the father of the baby.

S: No he wasn't. He used to walk back and forth all day with this letter. He would say, "I believe it. I believe it." Oh, God.

T: What happened to him?

S: I don't know [what happened to him].

T: Did he survive the march?

S: Oh, yes.

T: So he kept with it. How important for you was your faith?

S: I think it was important, because I survived. I think not only being a Catholic but any religion, that you are strong on religion, I think. Teaches survival.

T: Did your faith give you strength in a way?

S: I think so. Because in the service, that was one thing that they stressed. You had to go to church of your own choosing. Your custom. In the service we had all denominations and we had services and it was stressed that you go. Sometimes every day, at least once a week.

T: So it was something that you could depend on if you wanted to.

S: Yes.

T: You were liberated on May 3, 1945. What were your thoughts and your feelings at the moment you saw, the moment you were liberated?

S: Glad that I knew I was free to do what I wanted.

T: Describe the scene, if you will, as you saw American troops.

S: I think all POWs felt relieved that this was over, and we told our liberators we wanted something to eat.

T: So food was still the first thing on your mind. Was retribution on peoples' minds?

S: Some were and some weren't. This little town that we passed, that the mayor didn't want us to drink the water. Some guys, I'm not going to name by name, went back to this little town and found the mayor, took him to this fountain, and that water, it's all yours. Now you drink, and you're going to drink to your heart's content. They put him under that fountain and drowned him.

T: They killed him.

S: Yes.

**(4, B, 518)**

T: So retribution was for some people. But not for all, you said.

S: No.

T: How did you react? Did you feel angry at the Germans too or were you content just to...

S: No. Because there weren't actually any Germans around us except the guards, and most of them fled before the American troops got there because they knew they were coming.

T: So the Germans almost melted away.

S: Melted away. We were in this big forest area. So what happened to them I don't know.

T: So the Americans arrived, and what happened in those first moments when the Americans arrived?

S: They tried to share their food. The forward advancing units didn't have too much food. And then too, the officers knew what kind of shape we were in and they didn't want to get into trouble, so they gave orders not to give us too much to eat.

T: Because a lot of food could have been harmful. From this place, from Braunau in Austria, where were you transported to?

S: They found a place where they could land planes. First they brought trucks and we were not too far away. Probably twenty, thirty miles away. It was a small airfield next, and next to an airfield there was this aluminum factory. Great big aluminum factory where they used to smelt aluminum, and they trucked us in there.

T: There's thousands of you guys.

S: Yes. And we went in this aluminum factory. Of course they were shut down. But the heat from those ovens was nice and warm. Oh, a godsend. The American Red Cross came in and gave us coffee and donuts.

T: So they were there pretty quickly.

S: Yes.

T: The Red Cross.

S: Gave us coffee and donuts. We were starving to death. All the donuts you can eat and coffee. So some guys made pigs of themselves and ate too many donuts and coffee. Had about three or four guys that died of...

T: From suddenly eating too much stuff.

S: Coffee and donuts. The intestines rolled up on us.

T: I supposed there must have been a temptation when you've been hungry for so long and there's as much food as you want to just eat. How about you? How did you respond with all this food around?

S: I've always been a coffee drinker and a sweet eater. So I had coffee and donuts but I limit myself.

T: Did you know, I mean, health wise, I can't eat this because it's harmful? So much.

S: That's right.

T: So you said you stopped yourself.

S: Yes. So right away, as soon as some of these people got sick, they issued orders no more coffee and donuts. They put us on a diet.

T: Which probably was what they should have done first anyway I suppose, but... How long were you at this factory? Did you stay there for a while?

S: We stayed there for two days. Then there was a small airfield. They brought C-46s and 47s and flew us to Le Havre, France.

**(4, B, 568)**

T: That's Camp Lucky Strike.

S: Camp Lucky Strike. And there the first thing they did was they deloused us.

T: You hadn't been deloused yet?

S: Yes. They deloused us and gave us clean uniforms. They deloused us and then we went through showers. Nice and warm showers. Soap and water.

T: How did that feel after all that time?

S: It felt good (*chuckles*). Great. But we were still on a diet.

T: What were they giving you to eat?

S: Soups and that. Enough to eat. But nothing heavy. We wanted steaks and that.

T: It would have killed you.

S: Yes.

T: So a little bit of soup. And bread without sawdust in it.

S: Real American bread which was just like cake to us then. And all the generals came. First we went to an interrogation process for...

T: Individually?

S: Individual. Where the Army wanted to know everything that you remembered happened from the time you were shot down til today.

T: Holy cow. So they wanted to know about being interrogated in Frankfurt...

S: Everything. They wanted to know everything. Names, any names that you could remember. Regular American interrogation. I mean, they weren't mean about it. They just wanted to know.

T: It sounds like they were thorough.

S: They were real thorough about that and then all the generals came in. General Eisenhower, General Doolittle. At the end, General Doolittle was head of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Europe. When I was shot down it was General Hap Arnold.

T: Hap Arnold. Right.

S: Then Doolittle took over. General Doolittle was there and shook all our hands. General Bradley and, of course, General Patton.

T: So a lot of the big brass is coming through this camp and sort of getting to see you guys. You're getting to see them as well.

S: And they gave us a lot of promises. They told us that naturally we would get our backpay. No problem about that. All of you will get at least one grade rank up more than what you are now.

T: Did that turn out to be true?

S: No.

T: It didn't turn out to be true.

S: A couple of guys that I know got it, but I never got it.

T: So they were promising things that they never delivered on.

S: Never did.

T: How about back pay? Did you get that?



S: Oh, yes. I got all my back pay. That was Army regulations.

**(4, B, 607)**

T: You were in pretty rough shape when you got to Camp Lucky Strike. Did you stay there a while before they shipped you back to the States?

S: I was there a couple of weeks in the hospital. Then they put me in a hospital ship there and sent me to New Jersey. The USS *LeJeune*.

T: The USS *LeJeune*. You shipped back on that.

S: It was a hospital ship. Originally that was a German luxury ship. They turned it into a hospital ship. There was all POWs. Took almost two weeks because they shipped us from Lucky Strike to England, and from England to New York City, and from New York City we disembarked and they put us in another... It wasn't a ship. It was like a ferry to New Jersey.

T: So you finally landed in New Jersey.

S: New Jersey. There again they put us in a hospital and gave us—a lot of us [were severely wounded and had stomach trouble, so they kept us on a restricted diet.]

T: It was probably for the better, wasn't it?

S: We did get coffee and donuts if we wanted.

T: Now you could have coffee and donuts.

S: In limitation.

T: How long was it before you began to feel physically a little bit better?

S: It took a year.

T: Really? So the physical, getting your strength and feeling... You were in the service until—when were you finally [discharged], Simon? Remind me.

S: December of '45.

T: So you were still in the service for seven months or so.

S: Yes.

T: When you were recovering. I'm wondering how much the military did to deal with psychological recovery? How much did they help you deal with that part of this?

S: It was mostly unregimented. Psychologically they wanted you to still be in the Army and follow orders. They tried to make you feel that you were still part of the Army.

T: Did they have psychologists or psychiatrists around to help, to talk to you about what you'd been through?

S: No. That's one thing they... Physical treatment, some of it, but I think they neglected a lot of psychological. At that time I don't think they knew of the consequences. I don't think any of us got any psychological treatment. The only medical treatment was physical treatment. They wanted to build you up. That's it.

T: Right. When you're with other POWs, Camp Lucky Strike or on the ship or in the States, how much did you talk with each other about what you had been through?

S: Very little. We more or less tried to forget about what happened. We knew we were liberated. We knew we were free. That was first on our minds then.

T: Even though you had been through different POW camps and experiences, that was something that—so the conversations that you recall were about other things.

S: Yes.

**(4, B, 655)**

T: When you came back to the States how soon did you get to see your family?

S: About a month.

T: You came to Minnesota?

S: I came to Minnesota to Fort Snelling. I was home for about a month. Then I had orders to go from Minnesota to Miami Beach for R and R for two months.

T: When you were here in Minnesota you got to see your mom and some of your brothers and sisters.

S: Yes.

T: Did they ask much about what you had been through?

S: No. They didn't. I had an older brother. He was in the Army also. He was in the field artillery. He was in Anzio and they were rapid firing on a hill and they had what they call a hang-fire. When you have a hang-fire you're supposed to wait forty-five seconds before you open the breach on your gun. They were doing rapid fire and the guy that's in charge of the breach didn't realize that he had hang-fire. He opened the breach and when he opened the breach it exploded.

T: The shell was stuck in the barrel.

S: Yes. So everybody—I guess there were four or five guys in that unit—they got killed, except my brother [who] was so badly wounded that he was sent home on a medical [leave]. So he used to ask a lot of questions about that. There was four of us brothers in the service at the same time.

T: Guadelupe...

S: My brother Jesse. He was in the Marines. And my brother Joe was in the field artillery.

T: The one you were just speaking of. Your brothers, did they ask you questions when you saw them about...

S: No. Not really.

T: How about your mom and your sisters?

S: No. They were just glad I was home. They figured... They didn't want to ask too many questions about...

T: Were they curious to know about when you'd been a flier or things like that?

S: They knew I was a flier.

T: So that was okay. That was comfortable conversation. But the POW stuff? Is it that they didn't ask many questions or you didn't talk about it much?

S: I didn't volunteer and they didn't ask.

T: Almost like each party knew that we weren't going to talk about that.

S: Yes.

T: Would you say about that, were you ashamed of the whole thing or why is it you didn't want to tell them about it, do you think?

S: I wasn't ashamed. I don't think they wanted to ask because I think, I don't know, but I think that they thought it would be traumatic.

T: For you to have to talk about it again. Do you think they were right?

S: I don't know. I think they were.

T: And so it became something when you were home that maybe you talked about with your brothers a little bit because they were veterans, but your mom and your sisters...

S: No.

**(4, B, 692)**

T: How about...

S: My mother and sisters they just wanted me to be well fed.

T: They took care of that for you? When you got out of the service the end of '45 you came back to St. Paul, right? Friends you knew, or coworkers at different places you worked, you had a couple different jobs, how much did they know about your POW experience?

S: By that time I didn't go to work back to where I had been working before. I didn't meet anybody. For a long, long time I didn't have anybody ask me about POW experience and that.

T: You were just another returning veteran I guess.

S: Not even after I came back to the States and I was with Army personnel. They never questioned. They didn't ask about what happened. They weren't really... I don't know if they were told not to ask. They weren't inquisitive about what happened.

T: How about when you went to work in the civilian world? The late '40s or even in the early '50s. How much did people you worked with, your coworkers, your friends, how much did they know about it?

S: Nothing. Not for years and years. The only one that knew I was a POW was the owner of the company.

T: That was Southview Chevrolet. He knew.

S: Yes. Because he was a P-51 pilot.

T: So you had something in common with him.

S: So when I applied for the job I told him. He asked me if I had ever been in the service. I said yes. I said I was in the Air Force. He said, "What Air Force?" I said I was with the 8<sup>th</sup>. He said, "I was with the 8<sup>th</sup>." He said, "I was a P-51 pilot." I told him I was a ball turret gunner on a XVII and from then on we got to know real well.

T: So he knew you had been a POW.

S: Yes. But he never asked too much about my war experience. He always gave me one.

T: You mentioned him. You worked for him for a long, long time. You were married in '46 or '47?

S: '47.

Wife: '47. January 4.

T: January 4, [19]47. Your wife Beatrice, who's sitting here as we're talking, how much did she know about your POW experience when you were first married?

S: None. We didn't talk about it. I did talk about it because I didn't think it was—it didn't matter at the time. In those days I kept mostly all to myself. I didn't have too many friends that I associated with. I didn't go out with a bunch of guys and get drunk and that kind of stuff. A lot of them that came out of the service they'd go to the bars and that, and I never frequented bars because I wasn't a drinker.

T: Non-drinker, non-smoker. For that time that was very rare. Let me ask you, Beatrice, when you first met Simon it was after the war when he was back. Did you know he was a veteran?

Wife: [Yes].

T: When you got to know him and got married, did you ask about his POW experience or was that something...

Wife: I didn't even know he was a POW, [that] he had been one.

T: When did you first find that out?

Wife: Later on. Probably in our second year of marriage.

**(4, B, 730)**

T: So it was a while before you knew at all. Were you curious to know more about that or not really?

Wife: No, and the reason I asked him is because of things that he would do that were strange to me, like he'd be in bed and I'd walk into the room. He'd sit up like, you know, what are you doing here? What do you want? To me that wasn't normal. I was being very quiet going in, but he sensed that I was in the room.

T: Did you get to the point where you finally asked him what's causing this?

Wife: Yes.

T: How did he describe that to you? Do you remember?

Wife: He didn't really go into a lot of detail about it. Kind of just this is what happened. So I would just let it go because I knew just what he would say. He didn't really want to go into a lot of detail.

T: You could tell from how he said that.

Wife: Right.

T: You have two daughters, right?

Wife: Yes, we do.

T: Let me ask both of you. When your daughters were growing up, how much did they know about your wartime service?

Wife: They didn't. Until they became teenagers.

T: Did they ask questions?

Wife: They saw their dad's medals. Then they started asking questions.

T: What kind of questions did they ask? Because kids ask different questions than adults. What did they ask, Simon, and how do you decide what to tell them?

S: They were curious as to what I did. I told them I was in the Air Force. Flying. They thought that was something. A flier. Then they found out I was a prisoner of war and then they found out the kind of treatment I had. I wouldn't tell them much. Once in a while I was treated pretty rough I said, but I'm here today and that's all that matters.

T: Did that satisfy them?

S: [Yes].

T: Let me ask you this, because we're sitting here talking in pretty great detail about what happened to you almost sixty years ago now. Did you come to a point where you did find this easier to talk about?

S: It did. After I started with... At first we didn't have the prisoner of war organization. Then after I found out that there was such an organization, I joined them and we used to have social hour, social gatherings. When the first POW organization started here [in] Minnesota it was mostly social gatherings. We didn't go into a lot of detail because it was mostly Japanese prisoners of war at the time.

T: Really?

S: There was few of us that were from Europe.

**End of Tape 4. Tape 5, Side A begins at counter 000.**

T: So it took you twenty years before you even got involved with other POWs. Was it comfortable being with people who had had a shared experience, in a way?

S: I think it was because there's a lot of things you didn't talk about and then sometimes I met fellows that were in the same camp that I was in, and they were talking about something that they did or something that happened in a certain time in that camp. I remember that. We did this and we did that. Oh, yes. We did. But before that, we wouldn't talk because we didn't actually know what the other guy did. Met some of the fellows, real good friends of mine now, that were in Japanese prisoner of war camps and they would tell you in detail about things that happened to them. They had it pretty rough. What gets me, after we got out, the Veteran's Administration of the Army didn't take it upon themselves to really find out what happened psychologically, or basically, to most of the POWs. I don't know whether they didn't care about it or they want to do anything about it. They did very little for the POWs up until the late '70s or '80s.

T: After Vietnam, in other words.

S: Because when I got out of the service I got out with forty percent disability.

T: Was that for your legs?

S: For my leg and psychologically. With forty percent disability when you got out of the service in the '40s, it was only fifty-two or fifty-four dollars a month.

T: So it's not a lot of money.

S: With less than forty-five dollars a month you can't support a wife and children. So when I got married I knew I had a responsibility. I had to go back. I had to find a job. To support myself. I'd get sick. I'd go to the VA. I had a lot of headaches and a lot of stomach trouble. Continues.

T: And you hadn't had problems like this before you went in the service?

S: No. I had stomach trouble and I would go to the VA and complain about my stomach trouble. The first thing they wanted, they sent me to a psychiatrist. What the hell are you sending me to a psychiatrist? I have stomach trouble. It isn't up there. It's in my stomach. I said I don't need a psychiatrist. I need a doctor. Consequently, myself and the psychiatrist did get over in the VA. That was one bad part about it. I also used to get a lot of headaches because I had damage to my neck and my back vertebrae.

T: Is that from the plane being shot down? Right.

S: That's in my record. They could never understand that I had that much damage until back in the '80s and '90s. So I used to go to the VA for treatment. I wasn't going in for conversation, because I had forty percent but it was hardly nothing. Forty dollars a month.

T: So you're describing the VA as an institution that really was more of a hindrance than a help.

S: Yes. So when I got a job as a mechanic and [was] going to school on my own. So I get sick and then working for the garage you were in the union and you got medical benefits and health insurance and all that. So when I used to get sick, rather than go to my own doctor—I don't know why it did that because, I think I was a fool at the time, because if I had gone to my own doctor my insurance would take care of it one hundred percent. But there was a list of places here in Minnesota you could go.

T: It was so close.

S: The VA. And after about the second or third year the doctors would look at me and say, "You're still around. You've got a very good job making good money. We'll take ten percent away."

T: Of your compensation. So instead of being forty percent you were thirty percent?

S: Thirty percent. About six months later or so I'd get sick again from something or other and go back to the VA. Oh, Mr. Velasquez you're doing very well now. Take another ten percent away. A couple days later the same thing. It went all the way down to ten percent. So when I went down to ten percent I said to myself, why in the hell am I going to the god damned VA?



T: You go there and they take money away from you.

S: Money away from me. So that's just foolish. I got my own insurance which takes care of me as far as my medical is concerned. So all the time that I was working I was fully covered on my insurance. My wife and my children. We never had to worry about medical expenses because my insurance was covering. So I did that until I retired. When I retired, this was right before I retired...

T: You retired in 1985.

S: But I think you needed—either '79 or '80 the Veteran's Administration had what they call a protocol. They called all the POWs and had a complete physical.

T: For all of you guys.

**(5, A, 110)**

S: All POWs. So they sent me a letter that I had to report to the VA for a protocol examination and it just so happened that I was one of the very first that they called. Usually I'm the last because I'm a V. This time they started the other way. I was one of the very first, so I went there. Oh, Mr. Velasquez, you must be in excellent shape they said. We haven't seen you in forty years. I said, you sons of bitches!

T: That's not funny, but it is in a way because they thought you were doing really well.

S: Yes. So then I wanted my disability back. They wouldn't budge. They said, can't give you anything. So this went on. So I had my compensation from work and my Social Security, so I wasn't worried about it. So then I found out that all these guys that got out of the service without any disability were all getting a heck of a lot of money from compensation. They said I should apply. So then I went and applied for more compensation for my disabilities that were already there. They wouldn't budge. They said no. They said you're in good health. Here I found out that according to the VA they were supposed to be getting all my disability back plus some more from different things that had come up from POW, something that happened [when I] was a POW that still troubled me health wise. So here in Minnesota I couldn't, I tried everything to no avail. They would not budge. Ten percent.

T: What do you get now?

S: Hundred percent.

T: You get one hundred percent? When was that increased?

S: Not long ago.

T: Not long ago. So it took a lot of years of wrangling and pressure?

S: Yes, but here in Minnesota they wouldn't budge. Because I had to have proof. I said the proof is—look at my records. Look at my Army records. It's in my records what happened to me. I had had proof from people that were in the plane. I said it was only me and my tail gunner. I knew he was from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I knew his name and that was it. So then when I happened to meet him at one of these meetings that I told you about I remembered him. By this time he was with the POW organization.

T: As an officer.

S: As an officer. He says, I'll take of that. So he got me my disability back.

T: So he helped you take care of that. So now you got increased from that measly ten percent to one hundred percent.

S: Yes.

T: But that wasn't that long ago.

S: No. Then I applied here in Minnesota and they wouldn't budge any more than forty percent. So I went to Texas. They told me to go down there and he would help me. So I went to Texas and applied to the—what they called the officers that they had to take care of POW complaints. They started getting me up. So all my increases have been through Texas, not through Minnesota.

T: As a Texas resident and not as a Minnesota one. So it differs by state as far as how they treat this.

S: But I can't understand because Minnesotans are getting one hundred percent and they got it a long time before I did.

T: How do you explain that?

**(5, A, 164)**

S: I don't know.

Wife: Our names aren't Jones. Their names are Jones and not Velasquez.

T: So you think it has something to do with being Mexican?

S: I think so. Because here in Minnesota there's only two POWs of Mexican descent.

T: Two?

S: Two. And I'm one of them.

T: That's a very small group of people.

S: And the other one happens to be a resident of Texas to begin with. He was a POW in Japan. He was awarded one hundred percent disability through the Army when he got discharged. Right away. I got forty percent and he got—he was in worse shape than I was because he was in Japan. He was discharged with one hundred percent disability. He got the same process as I did. They brought him from one hundred percent to fifty percent.

T: They brought him down.

S: Yes. And I saw him three years ago. His name is David Chappa.

T: Does he live in Minnesota?

S: He lives in Minnesota. I asked him about his disability. Oh, he says, I'm only getting fifty percent. He said they cut me down. So I don't know whether he's getting, [if] he got back up to a hundred percent which he should have got a long time [ago]. He should have never got reduced. When he got married he went to work for Webb Publishing and that was a fabulous company to go to work for. Webb Publishing. He got pretty good salary and good bonuses and had (\*\*). So in many ways he wasn't...

T: He didn't need the compensation either.

S: No. So hospitalization, insurance would be carried and on the claim so he was one of these guys that was financially set. I don't have to worry. So every time they reduced him, he didn't care because financially he never... But to me that's not the point.

Wife: When we go to the ex-POW meetings we were the only Mexicans there.

T: You mentioned there were only two in Minnesota.

Wife: We tried to get him to go, but he went to a couple meetings and...

S: He's still pretty withdrawn.

Wife: Kind of a loner. Really a loner.

T: You said he's married though, right?

Wife: His wife just died a couple years ago.

T: So you're much more likely to talk about this than he would be.

**(5, A, 198)**

Wife: Right. David would not talk about it.

S: But last I found out they had cut him down to fifty percent. So I don't know whether he's back up to one hundred percent. I doubt it very much. If he doesn't pursue it, they won't give it to him.

T: That's what you've been saying too. That if you do pursue it, sometimes they cut it. One thing you mentioned was as far as your own recovery was a nervous condition. Can you talk about what you mean by that? What exactly is that?

S: I get startled. In a conversation that I don't think is right, I get very nervous about it. Heavy noise.

T: Loud noises or something?

S: Heavy arguments. I get startled.

T: Is that something that you picked up during the time you were a POW?

S: [Yes].

T: Has it changed at all...

S: Then too I think I got heavy noise, like bombings and that, I was a gunner and going through a lot of bombings and that...

T: And flak too.

S: Flak. I got a lot of nervous reactions.

T: And your plane blew up too.

S: [Yes].

T: So noises have been something that has that stayed with you pretty much since the time of the war?

S: Yes. At first I couldn't stand fireworks. The very few times that I went to fireworks I had to lie down.

T: Because they make [sounds], one after the other like a machine gun sound. Is that something that has lessened over the years for you, Simon, or not?

S: Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. It all depends. I don't know. Sometimes it becomes very startling and sometimes I'm not aware of it, if I'm walking someplace and somebody throws a firecracker...

T: You don't know it's coming.

S: I go to a ditch.

T: So even now it's something that's really stayed with you. And that's something that the VA didn't, couldn't deal with or couldn't, or didn't want to deal with. The last question I have for you is just to ask in a larger, in a general sense, what do you think is the most important way that your POW experience changed your life?

S: I think talking to people and finding out that in this generation for some reason or other, the American education department does not educate people about different wars and what happened in different sections. Because even in this last war in the media, even people supposedly that really are supposed to know, educated people that are supposed to know about the articles of war, they're ignorant about that. If you're [in] media you're supposed to study about that and know what you're talking about.

T: You would think so.

S: Because I was in service the last twenty or thirty years or so. I was a service manager. Southview Chevrolet. And I specialized in service. And to me, all my people that were working under me had to know what they were servicing. If somebody came and asked them a question, they had to know the answer or else they wouldn't work for me.

T: When you think about you as a person and how the POW experience may have changed you, in what ways were you a different person in 1946 than you were maybe in 1942?

**(5, A, 255)**

S: It wasn't only me that went through all this experience. It was thousands and thousands of different soldiers that went through the same experience that I had and they survived. That helped me a lot.

T: Knowing that other people had made it too. Anything else that you want to add before we conclude today? We've talked about lots of things.

S: About this bread, the bread that they used to give us. The bread... They used to give us a bar of cheese and powdered milk and...

T: So you'd mix it with water then.

S: Mix it with water. What I used to do. I used to mix my powdered milk, a little bit of powdered milk with water, and then I'd break up my cheese and throw it in that and boil it and make a spread, cheese spread, and that would go a lot further than just eating my cheese and my powdered milk. That's one of the things that we used to do. I think I started it, and from then on all the others did. They used to make like a cheese spread with powdered milk and the cheese. Because it was a good grade of cheese. I think it was either American or Velveeta, one of the two.

T: So making the food go further or something...

S: And it was more nourishing.

T: The food was a constant topic, wasn't it?

S: Yes. It was. We had a book. I forget who the author was. *Chicken Every Sunday*. I think everybody in that POW camp read that book. More than once. They knew it by heart. *Chicken Every Sunday*.

T: And of course meat was something you could only dream of, you mentioned too. Of the stuff that, thinking of how you ate and what you ate there, does what you eat now, do you eat some of those same things or avoid some of those things?

S: It's funny now because I hear of a lot of guys who won't eat Spam. I love Spam. Of course we didn't get that when I was a POW, but we had barley soup. And poor worms in that. I love barley soup now.

T: You still eat barley soup. That's interesting, because we've interviewed POWs of the Japanese and, of course, they got rice every day and many of them say they don't ever want to eat rice again.

S: A lot of them don't. And then the VA has found out that there was something in the husk of the rice that has something to do with heart disease.

T: Really?

S: The biggest percentage of the Japanese prisoners of war and Vietnamese and Korean that were on the rice diet suffer a lot from heart disease.

T: No kidding. So there was something in there.

S: And that's in the VA Chronicles...

T: That's documented information.

S: Documented.

T: In a sense, it was lucky you weren't in that situation.

S: And being in different categories, like us in Germany, we have a lot of ailments that we have that they didn't have because we were in different parts of the world.

T: The climate was completely different.

**(5, A, 298)**

S: And then too, Japan didn't belong to the Geneva Convention.

T: That's right.

S: So they didn't adhere to the Geneva Convention and some of those poor guys were treated real bad. Bad things. They told me a couple of stories that would curl your back.

T: David Chappa.

S: A friend of mine.

T: Ken Porwoll.

S: He was a real good friend of mine. I met him through the POWs.

T: We interviewed him.

S: He got out of the service. He was in hospital in New Mexico suffering from back problems. I think they call it tuberculosis of the spine.

T: That's what he had. Yes. That's right.

S: Supposedly they said he would never walk again. And you look at the man and he looks healthy.

T: Simon, that's my final question today, so let me thank you for your time here today.

## **END OF INTERVIEW**